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by W. Edmunds Claussen

THE RUSTY GUN
by Lee Floren

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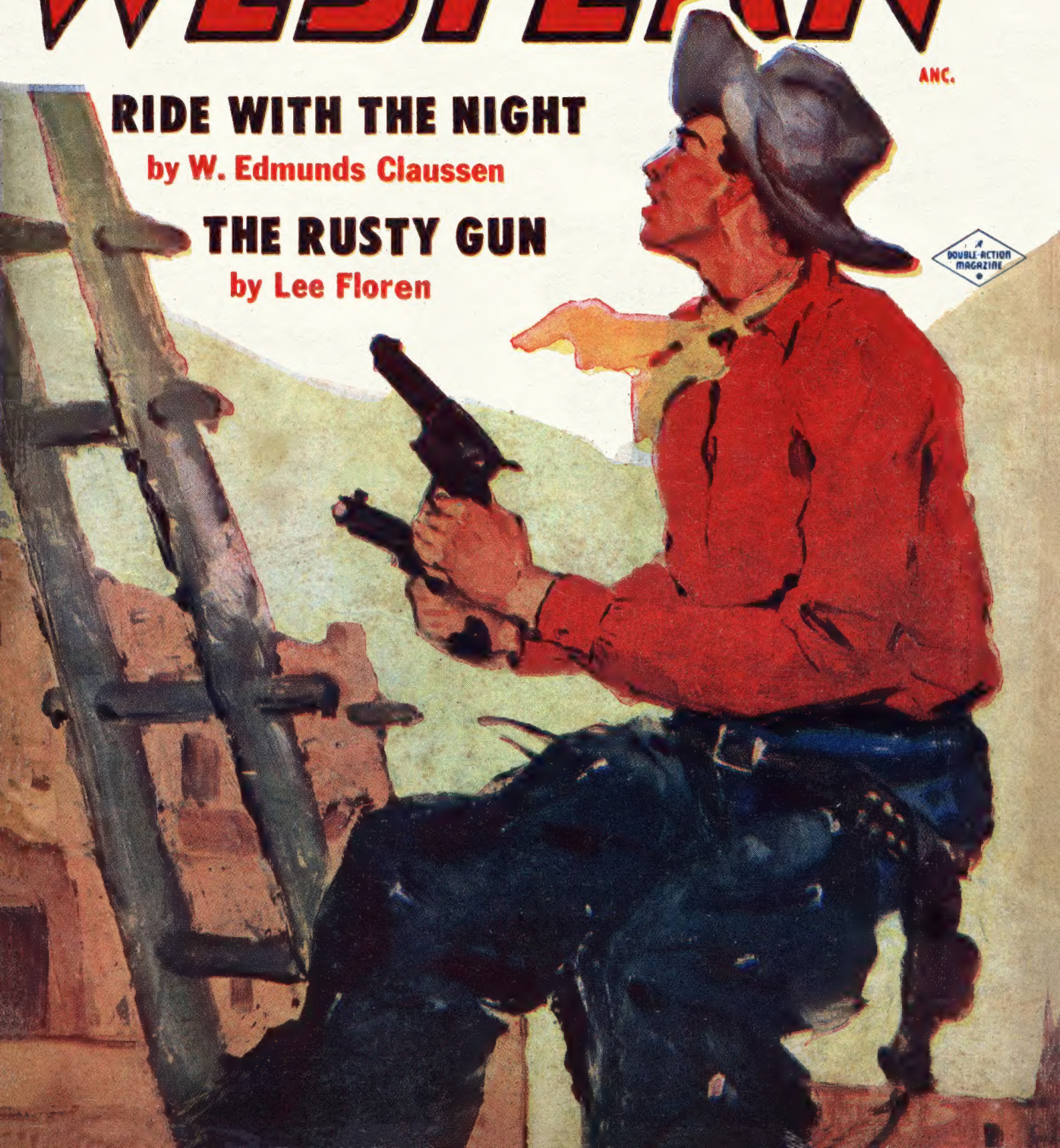

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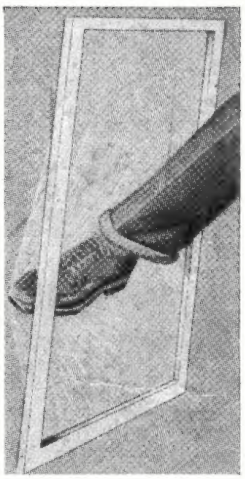

Imagine a storm window that weighs less than 8 oz.—yet seals out wintry blasts and humidity like magic! FLEXIBLE—you can punch it, kick it, even tap it with a hammer and it never springs back—never shatters! This amazing new type storm window is as **TRANSPARENT** as **CLEAR GLASS!** Not affected by snow, sleet, rain, dampness, because it is **100% WATERPROOF.** Resists climate changes—won't crack even at 25 degrees **BELOW** zero! Will pass any and all Fire Department tests! To install, just press on with dual-purpose Adheso border—no nails, no screws, hooks or tools. Costs you only pennies, yet you can use and re-use it year after year for winter protection and comfort!

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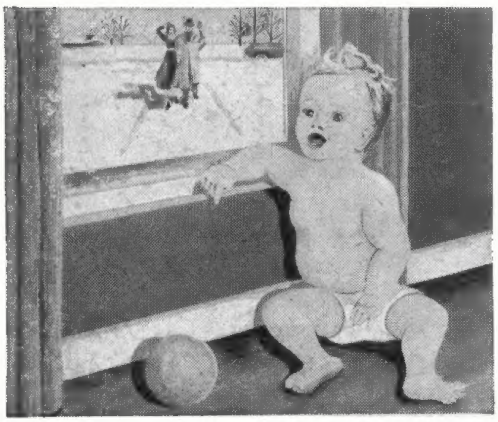
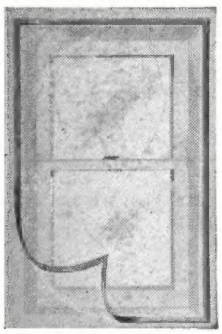


You can hardly see this TRANS-KLEER storm window—it's wonderfully transparent, yet it protects your loved ones from winter's frigid blasts. And each window costs only 39½ cents each!



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Over 1,000,000 of these new type storm windows were sold last winter alone. We invite you to try one, too, entirely at **OUR RISK**—no obligation whatsoever for you! When you've **TESTED** it—when you see how easily and quickly it goes on, you'll never again use the heavy, bulky, old fashioned kind! No more back-breaking installation! No more broken glass! It's a new, safe, sure way to winter comfort—for only pennies per window. **TRANS-KLEER** comes in rolls 36 inches by 432 inches—**ENOUGH FOR 10 AVERAGE SIZE WINDOWS, AT ONLY 3.95—HARDLY 39½¢ EACH!** In all, you receive **108 SQUARE FEET!**

PROVE IT YOURSELF WITH THIS SIMPLE MATCH TEST!

Try this: on a windy day, hold a lit match just inside a **CLOSED** window. The first strong gust of wind will blow it out. **NOW** put up a **TRANS-KLEER** window...you'll find that a lit match will **NOT** blow out **EVEN IF YOU KEEP YOUR REGULAR WINDOW OPEN!** No wonder so many have been sold! No wonder so many home owners, hospitals, farmers, buildings and churches are switching to **TRANS-KLEER!** To avoid disappointment, rush your order **NOW**--while our supply lasts! **SEND NO MONEY.** Simply fill in coupon and mail at once. Pay postman only **3.95** plus a few cents postage. Try a window for 5 days—test it. If not delighted, return the other 9 for **FULL REFUND. SPECIAL OFFER FOR BULK BUYERS: 6.90** for **2** full rolls (216 sq. ft.); **18.00** for **6** rolls; **34.00** for **12** rolls. **ACT NOW!** Mail the coupon **TODAY! (CANADIANS:** avoid tariff. Send direct to Thoresen Co., Dept. 120-N-47, 45 St. James St. W. Montreal 1, P.Q.)

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How I foxed the Navy

by Arthur Godfrey

The Navy almost scuttled me. I shudder to think of it. My crazy career could have ended right there. Who knows, I might still be bumming Chesterfields instead of selling them.

To be scuttled by the Navy you've either got to do something wrong or neglect to do something right. They've got you both ways. For my part, I neglected to finish high school.

Ordinarily, a man can get along without a high school diploma. Plenty of men have. But not in the Navy. At least not in the U. S. Navy Materiel School at Bellevue, D. C., back in 1929. In those days a bluejacket had to have a mind like Einstein's. And I didn't.

"Godfrey," said the lieutenant a few days after I'd checked in, "either you learn mathematics and learn it *fast* or out you go. I'll give you six weeks." This, I figured, was it. For a guy who had to take off his shoes to count above ten, it was an impossible assignment.

I was ready to turn in my bell-bottoms. But an ad in a magazine stopped me. Here, it said, is your chance to get special training in almost any subject—mathematics included. I hopped on it. Within a week I was enrolled with the International Correspondence Schools studying algebra, geometry and trig for all I was worth.

Came week-end liberty, I studied. Came a holiday, I studied. Came the end of the six weeks, I was top man in the class. Within six weeks I had mastered two years of high school math, thanks to the training I'd gotten.

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FAMOUS WESTERN

ALL STORIES NEW--NO REPRINTS

Volume 15 December, 1954 Number 6

Feature Novelets

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Windon couldn't think of a woman so long as he was on the run.

GUNPLAY AT GHOST RANCH ..... Gene Rodgers 26
Art Bishop could sell out at a fancy price — or get killed!

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Win or lose, those rangers were inviting trouble by crossing the river.

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ROBERT W. LOWNDES, *Editor* MILTON LUROS, *Art Director*
MARIE ANTOINETTE PARK, *Asso. Ed.* CLIFF CAMPBELL, *Asso. Ed.*

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Know Your West

A Department For Western Story Readers

By Harold Gluck

THROUGHOUT the Southwest the word had been spread by mouth, and printed circulars. "The Bar Bell Ranch needs thirty able and intelligent men." And as a result of that notice, it looked as though an exodus had taken place.

"I'll get to that ranch if I have to walk the three hundred miles," said Jed Harper. "Of course, here's a-hopin' I get some kind of a lift."

"Best money-making outfit," remarked Tom Lewis. "And they treat the cowboys fair and square. That's just where I'm a-headin'."

The Honorable Sir John Winson, Oxford graduate, had crossed the ocean to visit his great ranch, and he had brought with him additional capital for expansion. He had a very simple practical philosophy. "Man was created to be a meat-eater. So why not supply him with the best of all meat, beef?"

And on this particular Thursday a huge circus tent had been erected on a section of level land. There were rude benches and chairs inside. Outside, several cooks were preparing food for the hungry men who had come to try to get jobs at the ranch. Sir John Winson made a very important announcement to the men gathered inside the tent.

"There are only thirty jobs available on my ranch. I see about six hundred men have come here from all parts of the West. I shall be very fair. You will all take the same kind of a test; the thirty men with the highest scores shall be employed."

"If it comes to shootin'," said Mike Jeffers to his pard, "then I will be top man."

"But if it comes to ridin'," snapped back the pard, "then I am tops."

The test happened to be a written one.

Want to see how you would pass this brainstorm of Sir John Winson? In column A, there are eight statements, each of which is incomplete. In column B, there are nine words. Pick eight of these nine words to complete those eight statements. Get your pencil out now; there's one extra word in column

[*Turn To Page* 8]

WHAT Every AUTO MECHANIC Wants to Know

A motor vehicle is a machine of many parts, each part designed and constructed for its own special function.

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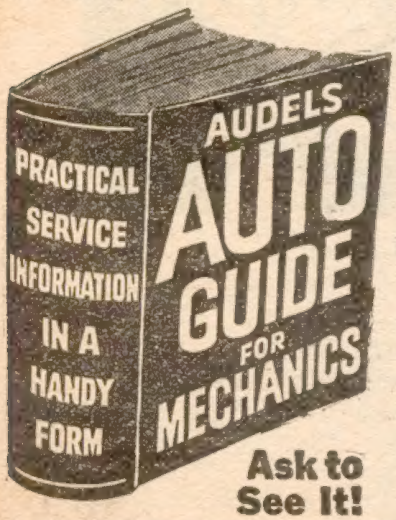

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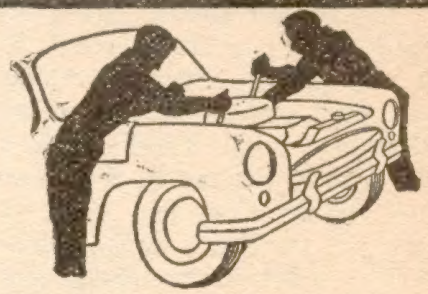

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B just to prevent a bit of lucky guessing.

The correct answers are at the end. Here's how you rate yourself: 8 out of 8, and you can marry Geraldine Winson, the beautiful daughter of Sir John Winson; 7 out of 8 and you become the foreman of the ranch; 5 or 6 out of 8 and you are a cowboy; 4 out of 8 and you ride the chuck wagon; below that, well, you better try something else.

Column A.

1. ——means shooting through the neck of a horse in such a way as to touch but not injure the cartilage above the bones. Thus done it would temporarily and completely stun the animal but would do him no serious injury.

2. ——was a broad band made of coarsely woven horse hair or sometimes of canvas or cordage and terminating at either end in a metal ring.

3. ——was the term applied in half contempt by the cattle men of the Southwest to those early squatters and homesteaders who first began to show a disposition to abandon the saddle for the plow.

4. ——was the name of a man and came to mean unbranded cattle. There are different versions of the origin of this word.

5. ——was a stuffed leather pad which covered the back of the horse and both his sides.

6. ——sometimes took the place of roping and was a way of sending an animal heels over head.

7. ——were cattle which were too thin for butchering and were moved from the grass ranges to the fields of eastern Kansas and Nebraska and surrounding areas to be fattened upon corn.

8. ——man took care of the extra saddle horses during the cattle drive and was sometimes known as the remuda man.

Column B

chuck
tailing
aparejo
feeders
cinch
nester
caavy
creasing
Maverick

[*Answers On Page* 59]

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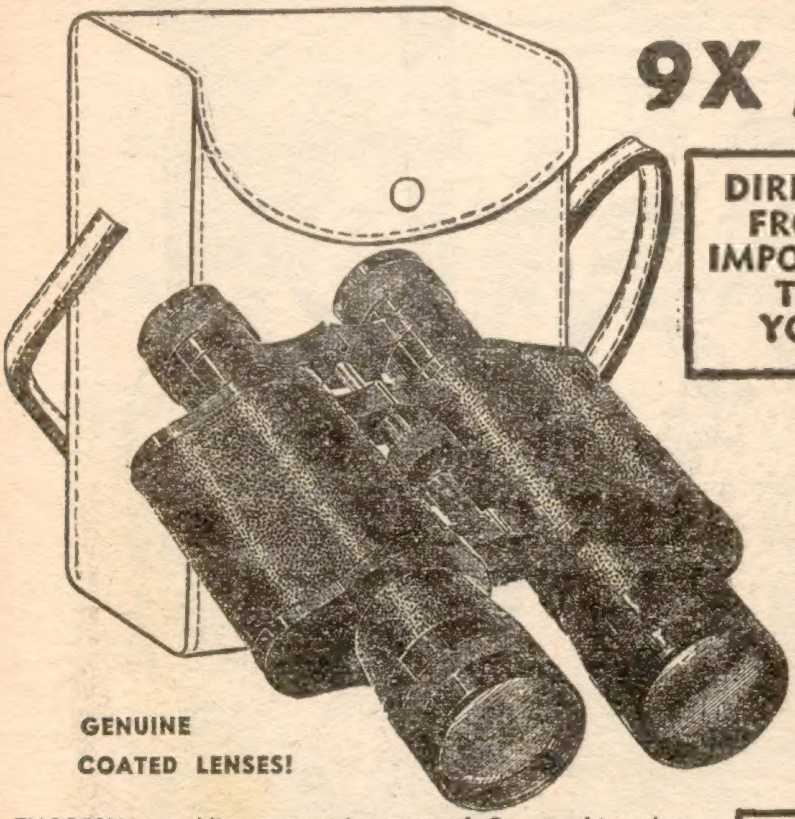

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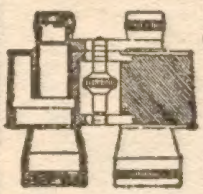

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Windon was running from the law, but he was hunting a man, too — a man who could put his flight to an end by confessing the truth.

RIDE WITH THE NIGHT

Novelet of the Hunted

by W. Edmunds Claussen

ALMOST a year had passed since I broke out of the Yuma snake pen and I wasn't worried about a marshal any more. I was riding a Southern Mail stage eastward, and thinking of this job Silas St. John had handed me back in Tucson. Most of my riding time was taken up in worrying what sort of a hellhole Stein's Station would prove to be.

This Silas St. John was a deep one. He worked for the U. S. Mails, and he'd been one of the original Butterfield men when the Southern Overland first started through the Territories. That had been two years before the war. He was an experienced, deep-seeing man. You can't hide anything from the oldtimers, there's no use trying.

"Windon," he said watching me with those rapier-like eyes. "You've been around; you're pretty tough."

"Tough enough, I guess."

St. John had only one arm, having lost the other in some trouble with Mexicans while building a station years ago; but with his one hand he was tapping a special delivery against the edge of his desk, and seemed to be turning over some thought he had on his mind. My clothes carried the stains of hard riding and working; my skin was bronzed by the hot Arizona sun,

and I knew he had me pegged about right. But the way his eyes had of dropping to my Navy Colt made me a little jumpy.

"I'll tell you what, Windon. I'll meet you at the *Senate* for a drink in ten minutes. There's something I've got to finish first, and I'd rather not talk here."

I'd gone to the saloon then and waited. All the time I was considering if I shouldn't clear out of Tucson before he turned me in on general suspicion. He knew, that fellow!

I wondered how he ever connected me with the jailbreak at Yuma. Of course, it had been the first escape by prisoners since the prison was opened a year earlier, and postal men undoubtedly had my description. But I wasn't the same as that bone-lean, sickly youngster who had cut through iron bars and swam the Colorado the night of that storm.

Weeks in the saddle of stolen horses and seven months on the Hassayampa placers had given me a different body. Yet I had better not be assuming too much in believing he wouldn't know me, for we had left behind a strangled prison guard on that river bluff where they built the Yuma cell blocks. I don't know yet why those other prisoners had to kill that man. I'd given strict orders for them to knock the guard out and bring him along with us. But they'd done it the other way, and that mistake told me clearly I wanted no more to do with them. We parted at the river's edge where it was so dark we couldn't see each other. Out there you could hear the Colorado River sucking and swirling. God alone knew what it would do to a swimmer weakened by the Yuma snake pen and sickened by their miserable grub. After we parted it had been each man for himself...

I was still thinking of that nightmare when St. John came into the *Senate*. He was tall, thin; a man with a gaze that could reach right down into another's secret crannies. But he seemed to be smiling dryly as he read me through this second time.

"The fact is, Windon," he said quietly, "the stage people need a station keeper at Stein's Peak. I can see you understand horses."

"I can handle most of them," I admitted.

He nodded for the bartender to pour two whiskeys. I didn't have twenty cents in my pocket but I was brash enough to demand, "What kind of hell can I expect at Stein's Station?"

He looked back to me and suddenly his brows knitted. "You're English?" he asked, and I nodded. He took me for the black sheep of some fine British family—probably a second son or a disgraced remittance man. He didn't know how close and at the same time how very far from the truth he had come.

"I like the English," he said finally. "They have sent us some stout enough boys who soon learnt their way around."

"Stein's is not so bad now," he said after the bartender had moved on. "In the old days when Cochise raided, and Mangas Coloradas was on the warpath, it was the wildest stretch east of Dragoon Springs and Apache Pass. It's still wild. Most men can't stand much of it because of the loneliness. I'd rather the station keeper took a woman along, perhaps even his squaw; it makes them more dependable."

"I travel alone," I told him.

"I judged that." He lifted a shoulder and passed me two pieces of gold. They were both double eagles— I knew then he was offering me a fresh start.

"Buy yourself plenty of shells for that revolver," he told me. "There are rifles and ammunition at the station. The station keeper will be glad to show you around before you take over his job. The only thing I ask is that you let me know when you intend to walk out."

"I'll do that," I promised. "Unless—"

"Unless something comes after you," he finished. His eyes held that cutting edge so capable of reaching through you. "I understand that, Windon; but I want you to let me know if you intend to pull out. That station has got to have someone to look after fresh relays, and get meals for the passengers. I'm banking on you."

I promised St. John that much and St. John, with the wisdom coming from a study of human behavior, understood that an Englishman's word was his bond.

THE OLD coach was a battered Concord that swayed violently on its dried out leather braces. The seats inside were shabby and I was glad to ride the high box with the driver. He was a taciturn fellow who handled his hitches with an abandoned nonchalance, seldom speaking except about the early days. He told me that originally mules had been used over this hellish country, and Butterfield drivers whipped them for the entire run through this canyon.

I didn't doubt it. A man who has known violence at first hand can tell that about a place. This land had seen bloodshed, and it didn't change overnight into something soft enough to bring families into. It was a canyon that brooded with the memory of old Apache devils; a narrow cleft between granite rimwalls from which the redmen had hurled their rock and arrows. San Simon station lay at the western extremity of the canyon, Stein's Peak stood at its eastern mouth, in New Mexico Territory. The trail between was a grinding ascent over dry washes and around treacherous mountain shoulders.

I wasn't thinking particularly about Apaches, and yet the feel of them was about the peaks and the rocks. There were other thoughts still nagging me which brought me a wintry chill. For a man who had once been in Yuma there was always the dread fear it could happen again.

The coach swung through the Peloncilla mountains and the station burst suddenly into sight. The driver gave his teams a resounding crack across their rumps that brought a renewed flurry of speed from them before we shot into the corral enclosure. These days the gate stood open unless danger was expected, but a few years ago it had been closed behind the coaches as a precaution against surprise by the Apaches.

Redwick, the station keeper I was soon to replace, was a man of fifty-five or sixty, whom St. John had judged correctly by saying he would be glad to have me replace him.

He gave me a hard look and I suppose I passed his inspection. "Come alone?" he asked once we struggled with the sweat-wet harness. I said I was alone.

"Too bad; you ain't going to last long. Gawd, these hills have got so much emptiness in them they eat out your insides!"

There was a stone house built into one side of the enclosure and a corral fence on the far side where the fresh horses were kept in readiness for the change. I helped Redwick get them into their traces while the others, three men passengers and the driver, found the meager fare Redwick had prepared in his kitchen. We were finished with the teams by the time they came out picking their teeth. Judging by their expressions the meal had been none too good.

The driver took his place, the passengers climbed inside, and the coach was off before the last man inside had seated himself.

"I'll ride out on the next coach west. That'll be tonight," Redwick told me. "And it ain't none too soon. You'll need that gun," he told me approvingly. "Few Apaches drop in on you once in a while. Besides them itchin' to take

your skelp, there's always snakes between here and the spring, and you never can tell about holdup men chasin' somewhere ahead of a lawman. Country is hell these days, killers and blackguards and the goddam carpetbaggers in the South."

"I take it you're a Southerner?" I grinned.

"You're damned tootin' I am. Memphis man, and I like my women around. Friendly ones that know how to keep you company at night."

I took the spent teams over the path to water. I found it in a shallow seep hole dug between cottonwoods that grew fifty yards in front of the station. The high, pyramidal rock of *El Peloncillo,* the peak, rose directly behind the stage corral. It was a raw, violent expanse about Stein's peak, a wild, unconquered land that still carried the feeling of treachery and mystery about it that was so characteristic of the Apache strongholds.

The corral enclosure built around the station rooms was about thirty by fifty feet, of rock slabs bound in adobe, and was ten feet high. It had been erected by Silas St. John in the fall of 1858 when the Butterfield stages first opened the Territories. During the war the original Overland Mail had been moved north to the central route and by now this line had become a series of shorter runs. The coaches were working tri-weekly schedules, which meant I wouldn't have much to do between time except tend the horses. After the labor I put in on the Hassayampa without finding color, it was the kind of a job that appealed to me.

I wasn't worried about the emptiness of the Peloncillas, as was Redwick. Not at all like him, I wasn't thinking of women. Not right then, I wasn't....

I SAW HER first when the westbound coach rattled up and Redwick was hauling his belongings from his room. She was climbing down the iron step with the driver trying to help her, while I was unhitching their teams. She had on a black silk skirt that fitted her thighs and hips tightly, and a filmy blouse cut low around the neck. The upper halves of her breasts revealed themselves clearly as she bent her body toward the driver. Good Lord, what she did to me after those weeks without a woman!

She stood to one side with her black hair piled about her shoulders. She was watching the coach where the driver was trying to get someone out from inside. I couldn't tear my look from her. She had a mouth that definitely was too hard. It was red and a little too broad across a very white face. And her eyes were black and showed in that unguarded moment a great deal of anxiety. The fatigue of that pale face plainly revealed the hardship of the road they had followed westward from Mesilla.

A man began climbing out of the coach irritably fighting every effort the others made to help him. He stood a few moments arguing sharply with the driver before moving toward the station.

Redwick called out cheerfully, "Hello Martha. Here's luck! I'll be ridin' with you."

The woman gave him a cool look registering no feeling at all that I could see. Then she fell in beside her partner and tried to take him by the arm. He didn't seem to like her helping him.

Obviously, the man had been wounded. I thought it would be the shoulder, for he carried his upper torso stiffly. Beside me Redwick was gloating. "All the luck in the world. I pull out and what happens? I ride on the same coach with Martha; and that tinhorn she's got with her ain't going to matter."

I asked with a thin lifting of my voice, "Who is Martha?"

"Her first name is all I know. What else do you figure is necessary to know

about a woman who follows her calling?"

I didn't say anything in reply to Redwick. I simply led the spent horses between the catclaw thickets to the well. So, Martha was what the first coach west had brought! And judging by the cut of his clothing, the man with her was a gambler. I didn't think time was going to lag very much at Stein's Station.

- 2 -

THEY WERE coming out of the dining room before I had their coach ready. That is, the driver and Redwick were slowly walking out. Martha stood with her back pressed to the door; giving them a smooth line of talk.

"Make up your minds we're staying here until Jack's better. He's not going any further tonight. We can stay, can't we?" and now her eyes flicked over to me for the first time.

I didn't warm up to the idea because it wouldn't be so good with her around with another man for a couple of days. We would be too close, all bunched together and crowded in by these ten foot walls. But she hadn't given me much choice. I felt the lancing power behind those two dark eyes and I nodded, answering her question.

There would be all kinds of complications, of course. The next stage west wouldn't be through for two more days. In the meantime I didn't know how badly the gambler had been hit; it was possible he would die.

The driver had climbed the wheel and by now Redwick had tossed his luggage inside and found his place on the high box beside the driver. He was staring down at me and grumbling in a most uncomplimentary vein.

"I been holed up alone in this stinkin' canyon seven weeks. Some other people could fall down an outhouse and come up holding Maximilian's watch. All I mean to tell you, son, keep away—"

The coach was off in a whirl of dust.

Her voice reached me then with a certain huskiness. "Have you got anything at the station that would help him? He's developing fever. I suppose, actually, his shoulder should be cauterized."

I wasn't going to do that; I was no doctor, and I told her so. But I'd look over whatever medicines Redwick had left behind. That sort of thing was generally kept on hand in case of Indian ambush. Her eyes, when I offered whatever aid I could give, brightened considerably.

I found an odd assortment of remedies on a shelf beside the kitchen fireplace. A bottle of Simpson's chloroform, cotton, castor oil and a fluid in a container missing its label that had the smell of carbolic acid.

"He's not going to die," she said behind me and I turned with the carbolic still in my hand.

"I'm glad of that. We'll know more when we see how bad he's hit."

"It's not his wound. It was the jouncing—that long ride from the Mimbres." The pallor appeared to be deepening on her cheeks over the mere mention of the stage trip.

"Why was he shot?" I asked.

She looked at me in a bland manner and without answering turned back to the room where they had eaten. I followed her and found Jack still seated at the table. His face had turned an ashen gray from pain.

"Come on," I said. "We've got to get you under blankets."

I had noticed a brush pallet piled against one room in the opposite corner of the station from the kitchen. An occasional passenger spent the night in this place, usually if he was too sick to

stand the coach jolting. I wanted to get them as far away from my own quarters as I could.

Jack didn't want any help but I got my shoulder under him and helped move him into the small room. His skin was hot and I noticed his breath was sour when it touched me. I got him out of his coat and he sat there on the bed, his eyes wide and a little wild. He wore a gun harness and there was a hole in his shirt over his left shoulder. But he wore a bandage next to his skin and the little blood I saw had dried.

He unhitched his gun harness and laid it carefully on the floor beside the pallet. I knew from the deliberate way he did it, fear was working inside him. Someone was riding his trail, perhaps because of Martha. It brought those weeks back closer when I first had left Yuma behind, and I knew Jack would have no peace for a long time.

His lips had curled away from his teeth as he stared at Martha. "You cat!" he snarled.

She didn't have anything to say in reply. Then his glance snapped at me, his eyes feverish and bright. I figured that pain and loss of blood had left him pretty close to collapse.

"I want something understood now," he said. "In case I pass out, you are to let Martha alone."

I stood staring with sudden heat racing through my blood. I told myself I didn't want any part of this woman. And yet I knew it was a lie. As soon as he was asleep I would be coming for her, and she would be ready; I read that much in her look. Behind me I heard Martha say, "All right, Jack."

To me she added, "You better cut his shirt away. I have another here in his bag."

There was no question that anger threaded her tones. These two were already tired of one another.

AFTER THE cauterizing I went outside beneath the stars and rolled a cigarette. My hands shook unsteadily as I held the paper.

Redwick had been correct in calling Jack a tinhorn. He just hadn't what it took to measure up to being a man.

His wound had been ringed by ugly red circles so that I was afraid blood poisoning had already set in. I'd taken a wad of cotton soaked in carbolic and probed out the hole with that. But it had been necessary to give him chloroform first, he raved and fought so fiercely. And now the weakness he'd shown was having its effect on my own nerves.

I reasoned to myself a man ought to take his dose better than this. Somehow I was remembering the way my mother had doctored my brother Jim the time a horse's hoof had opened his scalp. Jim had just laid there and let her do what was needed, knowing there was no money to hire a doctor, no time to be running around finding one even if we owned a shilling. In those days that now seemed so far away, we had run about on the London docks and I'd seen a good many accidents. Some men took theirs gamely, others were like frightened children. I recalled Jim uttering scarcely a murmur while mother sewed around his head with a common needle. It must have hurt both of them like sin.... But the one inside, the gambler, had proved a weakling.

I was building my second cigarette when I caught the swish of her silk skirt beside me. She sat down on the edge of my box and put her head against the rock wall. I studied her briefly in silence. Her profile was clean, sharp, her mouth loose. She hadn't turned to look at me yet. "Do you love him enough to run away with him?" I asked.

She lifted a shoulder. "Does it matter?"

"He's not good enough."

She laughed without any humor. "You never can tell that about a man until it's too late." She let herself swing

around, then, her dark eyes lancing through him. "What's your name?"

"Windon."

"Are you running from something, Windon?"

"No," I said promptly, and I knew she understood I lied. There was no use repeating the question to her, she'd never acknowledge it, either. But I thought: *Sister, we're both in the same boots. You'll never know a moment's peace, never know a meal without worry or a sleep without nightmares. And the one warming your bed beside you won't be worth powder to blow out his brains.*

I said again, "Martha, you're wasting your life with him." Then I remembered the telescope bag she was carrying and I knew I had my answer. The gambler's winnings would be her reason for accepting him.

"I don't quit," she told me quietly. "Right or wrong—we've got to take it as it comes."

And you, Martha, I thought, *are worth a damned sight more than that fellow inside.* She was too solid and straight to be following the profession. I wondered what had driven her into it.

She must have read what was in my thoughts for her hand touched my arm and she began talking softly. "Some people believe they're driven into things by fate. I don't. We all do the things we do from our own choice. Maybe it's what's inside makes us choose, but there's no use kicking about it afterwards.

"I remember my sister. She was weak like most of us—and when she came home with the news that something had happened, my father hit her until he knocked her teeth loose. He was drunk and angry because she wouldn't name the man. In the end he drove her out of the house. I wasn't that way. I grew up early and went into it freely. It was because we had nothing to eat in the place—nothing but whiskey."

It was an unrelenting world and Martha had all the stubborn fortitude to face it without whimpering. There was no shame in her, no recriminating thought to plague her. I could admire a woman like her; I knew she was far and away above her calling, she was better than the man she had chosen.

I wondered in a rapid moment what it would be like if we changed all this. What would the future be like if we rode away together? And then the nagging remembrance of Yuma came back in all its hellishness. There was a good chance that some day I might return behind their bars. I was still looking for Laughlin, the man who could tell a marshal the truth about me. I meant either to get the truth out of him—or, if I failed, to kill him. But I might never run across Laughlin in the vast stretches of untracked desert. So long as this chance of prison loomed in my future it would be no life for Martha.

She was leaning against my shoulder so that the faint perfume from her hair was reaching me and stirring woman-hunger hidden inside. It would have been so easy, with her willing, with no one but us two alone in the station yard. Her hand rested against my knee, and she was waiting for me to give some sign that I wanted her.

Somehow I couldn't do this with Martha. I doubt if she had ever said the things about her life to another man that she had unburdened to me; if I touched her now before I cleared my own past, it would be dragging Martha down in the same way the gambler was degrading her.

Sentiments like these were just damned incongruous, but at the same time they brought the truth home to me. I would never be able to face any woman until I turned aside this shadow that hung against my back trail. I knew then I must ultimately find Laughlin and have someone listening while I whipped confession of his crime from him.

- 3 -

IN THE MORNING I took care of the horses before cooking my own meal. There was a bay horse among the stage animals that had been ridden, and there was an old Mexican saddle slung over a harness beam that gave me a sudden thought. It would be wise to leave Martha and this place behind for today.

She came into the kitchen looking very tired while I was finishing.

"I'll be taking a look over the Peloncillas. You're not afraid to stay here alone?"

She gave me a sharp appraisal with her troubled eyes. "You're coming back?"

I nodded and told her it would be best if I got away for a while. These ten foot walls were beginning to choke me. I couldn't stay in this place so close to the woman without something happening.

Her mouth drew up a little tighter. "You're afraid to stay here with me, Windon."

That spun me on my toes. "I'm afraid of no woman; nor any man, Martha."

Her eyes held a glint of secret amusement that drove anger through me. Yet I knew she was displeased with me at the same time. She wouldn't stay and eat at the long table beside me but took her plate into Jack's room. She came out and filled a second plate for him. I wouldn't ask how he was, just kept my eyes on the food in front of me.

She stood in silence and waited for me to at least offer something friendly. Then: "You get nowhere by running away from yourself. I expected you would know that, Windon."

Her words struck home and I decided to postpone my trip into the hills. An hour later Martha still hadn't returned from Jack's room and I decided to find out just how bad I'd made things. I knocked on their door.

She opened the barricade a few inches revealing a narrow portion of herself. There was no friendliness about her, and I wondered if she and Jack had been fighting, too. "He's not any better. I'll stay here to nurse him," she said.

"You ought to get some fresh air," I told her.

Jack's voice came from deeper in the room. "Go away, fellow; we don't want you."

Anger slapped and banged around inside me and I went back and spent another hour with the horses. At mid morning I was still turning the imponderable question of Martha over in my mind. Sometimes a man's destiny could be only a thing of straw, a hollow phantasm leaving him to flounder through a quagmire. This was the way it had happened after I lost my bearings.

I had been searching for Laughlin ever since I broke free of Yuma, but only in an indirect way. My chief aim had been to avoid any complication that might bring about my return to prison. From now on I would turn all my energy toward locating a man.

Laughlin had been assistant division boss of the Ehrenberg-Prescott freight line at the time I had been one of its drivers. A smug, self-important man who had made money for his bosses—and more money for himself. I thought it all out in the snake pen at Yuma. Laughlin had been the only man beside myself who could possibly have known about those gold shipments and passed the word along to the holdup crews.

It had sounded so well when he gave his testimony at the trial. Actually, they had made it appear that I had been the one to pass the information out. There had been evidence in those freight holdups—and how easily

Laughlin had connived this!—that cinched my sentence in Yuma for ten years.

When I returned to the Hassayampa placers Laughlin had disappeared. I realized now that the reason I had struck Silas St. John for this job with the Southern Mail had been in the hope of tracking him down. A man like Laughlin wouldn't veer far from the type of work he had known all his life. He was a stageman, fundamentally, and in some promising stage operation I would run into him trying his luck. When I found him I would sweat a confession out of his black soul.

Once or twice during the afternoon Martha came out after a Mexican water olla or something to eat from the kitchen. Afterwards she'd go right back to her room. The door was always closed after she entered. It was a door formed with a number of bark-peeled poles bound together with rawhide; you could hear through it plainly, but apparently they weren't talking.

I kept on working around the station. Redwick had been a lazy station keeper and there was enough cleaning up to do to keep me busy another week.

At dinner she came out and helped me as much as she could. Strain had dug deeply into her face and I decided the ordeal with Jack was beginning to break her. As usual she held one plate aside for his meal. "He's too weak to come and get it," she said.

My eyes kept running to his gun harness which I found looped over the back of a crude station chair. She finally caught my interest and a frown wrinkled her face. "This is something you don't know about, Windon. He crawled out of his bed with that gun in his hand. I must have fallen asleep; I woke up with him fumbling the door latch. He was going to shoot you while you weren't looking, but I took it away from him."

So the gambler hated me this much! It went slashing around my mind until I realized he sensed the way things were between Martha and me. There was a current flowing between us, an exchange of thoughts that passed through our looks, and an inner stirring that was hard fighting against. So long as she was in the station there would be no rest. So long as her smoky, dark eyes followed me with their half hidden longing, her throaty words broke the hollow stillness, and so long as her sensuous body was here to goad me, I would want her.

She was on her way back to her room when I called her. "He's going to die, isn't he?"

She read me soberly before turning her gaze. "I don't know, Windon. I guess he will."

I was struck by the emptiness of her expression. She would be alone in this desolate place if he did die, and all their plans would go up in smoke. Whatever their plans were, I knew nothing of them, nor did I know the circumstances under which they had left Mesilla together. But I had been able to read a great deal more than showed on the surface. The gambler had made a clean winning before she threw in with him, running away from the other life that had existed for her in Mesilla.

After she had returned to the room I drifted over to Jack's gun harness meaning to lift out his shells. The Colt was a well-oiled, blue-barreled .38. As I slid it from its holster I had the uncanny insight that it had already killed its quota of men. I would be lying dead right now beneath these ten-foot walls if it hadn't been for Martha. The thought sent cold fingers playing up and down my neck, lifting my hackles. Then I discovered the gun chambers were already empty. I thought, again, *Martha, you would do to ride the river with!*

IT WAS DARK except for the bright wash of moonlight striking the desert. I could see eastward a great distance through the open gate. My gaze

followed the twin stage ruts as they crawled around a shoulder of the Peloncillas. Clusters of catclaw and yucca made dark outlines on either side of the trail blending, finally, into a solid gray mass of distant catclaw and far rises of the mountains. Down this trail a solitary horseman was threading his way.

An inner warning that grows loud with men who ride the night began whispering to me. This rider was coming after me; I knew it as surely as though he shouted the information to tell me.

I stood at the further end of the corral, and now as the horseman drew near I moved to the kitchen door. My hand dropped unconsciously after my Colt.

I had rolled and smoked perhaps a half dozen cigarets since dinner and had no other way of judging the passing of time. It could have been close to midnight. My thoughts had jumped constantly across the yard to the room where Martha lay watching her man die.

I let a curse slide thickly from my throat and dropped my cigaret, killing the glow with my boot. The rider was now closing up on the station. I could hear the scuff of his horse's iron hoofs turning stones in the trail, the muted jingle of his bridle chains. The man's voice drifted quietly into the station, speaking low to his animal.

I backed into the dimness of the kitchen as he pushed through the gate. He sat his horse silently, a saddle carbine beneath his knee, throwing his searching, hawklike gaze around the corral. At the same moment my glance gathered the thin sheen of his badge pinned to his shirt. I lifted the Colt from my holster. They weren't going to catch me this way. By God, I wasn't going to take another stretch at Yuma!

I drew bead on the marshal sitting out there in the bright moonlight. My gun hammer had already been dogged back. My aim passed by his head then past his belly for a gutshot, and came to rest against his star. It was more appropriate this way—it typified my contempt for their kind of blind justice, for their pen at Yuma.

Then Martha's words drifted across the dead-still yard halting my shot. "Who are you? What is it you want?"

The marshal's body gave a noticeable jerk, his head pivoting to find the speaker. He had a heavily shadowed, lean face, and under the moonlight I found a track of lighter skin curving across his cheek marking the course of an old saber scar. "I'm looking for a man. Where's the station keeper, ma'am?"

I felt her eyes leap toward the kitchen, then whip quickly away. "He's a man named Redwick. An old fellow—probably hard to waken."

"Heard of him," the marshal nodded and seemed satisfied. "I'm hunting for someone else. A tall fellow; lean, saddle worn clothes and polite manners. An Englishman."

IT WAS PRETTY obvious the lawman hadn't heard that Redwick had been replaced and the thought reached me then that I was safe. Martha let a moment ride and I wondered what kind of conflict raged behind her brows. She had me graded in my proper place by now; she understood the common bond that lay between us. But how would she react?

I waited tensely for her answer, all the while my Colt holding level on the lawman's heart.

"There was a man like that through here," she said finally. "He stopped by to ask Redwick the trail to Shakespeare. He watered his horse, ate something himself, then rode on."

The marshal chuckled smugly. "I had a hunch, ma'am. These days they're all headed for Shakespeare. There'll be quite a roarin' hellhole out there in the Pyramids if they keep on findin' silver."

"Will you stay for something? Water or coffee, sir? My husband and I

are lying over till the next stage—he's very ill."

"No, ma'am. Thank you. I much prefer an open camp."

He kneed his horse about, tipped his hat and rode through the gate. I read him as one who hated human habitation, as one who distrusted even such remote accommodations as were offered by Stein's Station. A human bloodhound, a hired killer whose only sense of contentment lay in the justice of a hot rifle barrel.

Martha had given me a brief reprieve, perhaps a few days before the marshal gave up his search through the Pyramids to the south. But it meant my work here at Stein's was ended. I would get word somehow to St. John to send out another keeper. So long as this marshal hounded my tracks the open trails were my only security, the finding of Laughlin my only hope.

I slipped the Colt back to its leather, stepped boldly out into the station yard. I found her leaning weakly against the corral wall, her gaze still following the lawman as he plodded southward following the thin trail toward the Pyramids. She failed to pull her look about as I stood beside her in the silent yard.

We were alone in the station with only the moon brushing us with its light. She had donned a thin, silken nightgown that shimmered softly as it molded in folds against her thighs and hips, and against her breasts that struggled so proudly to rise above its restraining fabric. Her lush, mature fullness sent desire slugging in my brain.

"So you *are* running, Windon?" she murmured softly. "I understand now why it must be this way between us. No one knows what it means to have this shadow against the background; no one can understand unless he is running himself!"

I locked my hands behind my back, forcing the woman hunger to one side. "You're grand, Martha," I told her. That pleased her so that she turned her look, her dark eyes lifting to me. "You lied for me," I added quietly. "Why did you do it?"

She came away from the wall with that rare smile on her heavy mouth. Her hands fitted themselves about my arms. Slowly she slipped them around my neck.

- 4 -

IN THE MORNING she gave no acknowledgement of last night.

"How long will it take the marshal to find out I'm not in the Pyramids?" I asked her while she helped in the kitchen.

She shot me a swift glance and let the ladle slide back into the bean pot. "You've got nothing to worry about for two or three days; maybe longer. Everybody in El Paso and Mesilla is heading for Shakespeare. They're not going to like the idea of a lawman prowling around. Too many of them have their own shadows to watch—and Mister marshal's not going to get his information in a hurry."

I had been right last night when I estimated the time it would probably take before the marshal rode back. It gave me a feeling of relief. I told her slowly, "I'd count it a favor if you'll look up Silas St. John as soon as you get to Tucson. Tell him it's all off; he'll know what it means."

Her loose, heavy mouth lifted in a mocking sort of smile. "Running again, Windon?"

I thought: *and what'll you be doing when you take tonight's stage?* She was no different than I; though actually this time I would be on Laughlin's trail rather than running before a lawman. But I needn't tell her about that.

It was all over between us. She had taught me there wouldn't be any happiness worth while until I got Laughlin; I in turn had given her some sort of courage when loneliness had stung her hardest. Beyond this we had nothing more to offer.

She prepared a plate for Jack heaping it high with beans, as she had done at those other mealtimes. It seemed to me she was taking him considerable solid food in view of his condition. I kept my glance on that plate and asked quietly,

"How is he?"

"He'll be able to ride on tonight's stage."

That struck me as odd. If he was this much stronger why didn't he take his meal with us at the long table in the main room? Then I remembered the time he had wanted to take his shot from behind their door. I decided if he wanted to keep away now it was all right with me.

But Martha couldn't fool me that something wasn't wrong. The way her eyes kept dropping away from me made me think she'd patched up her troubles with Jack.

She went into her room after we ate and closed the door. I leaned hard against the wall trying to figure the thing out. Some flutter of sound had wakened me this morning before dawn. It was still pitch dark when I wakened; at first I had recalled low voices, the faint squeal of their door. I had laid quiet with my gun cocked a long time but nothing happened. Finally the thing worked on my nerves and I'd crept to the narrow window and looked across the yard. There was a light burning behind their door that went out presently while I watched. I laid down again on my bed thinking what they did in their room was their own business. But was it—when one of them was crawling around the floor with a gun in his hand?

The day dragged more slowly than I could stand. What if Martha was wrong about how long it would take the marshal to search the Pyramids? Temptation roweled me to saddle up the bay horse and ride. But I couldn't do it this way and leave Silas St. John in a fix. I took hold of a fork and cleaned up the corral for him, and the kitchen when that was finished. All this time Martha never left their room. But actually I didn't care about that any more.

That afternoon a rattler frightened the horses while I led them to the spring. The bay gelding that showed the saddle marks bolted into the canyon. He gave me the most trouble of the string. I had to chase him a half mile before I caught up with him.

The ground where I caught him was strewn with empty shell casings turned green with age. It set me to thinking about this place. In the last year of the war the 5th California Volunteers had walked into an Apache ambush at this spot. My gaze began rimming the ridge of the Peloncillas, the purple haze that lay against the trough of Doubtful Canyon. It had earned its name well among stagemen, both before and after the war. Pretty soon that gut between the rock was going to live up to its treachery again; pretty soon the marshal was coming back for another look at Stein's Station. Damned if I was going to be sitting here on my hocks waiting. I was going to ride this bay gelding away as soon as the next stage had pulled out.

Then on the way back the bay acted strangely. We were quartering in behind the spring when he refused to walk further. At first I suspected another snake. I drew my gun and kicked him around the catclaw.

Now the bay stopped dead in his tracks and I looked down on the thing in the brush. At first my eyes stabbed downward in disbelief, little cold fingers working a frost up and down my back. It couldn't be—it simply didn't seem possible. Then I remembered the voices I'd heard last night, the squeal

of their door. A cold, empty dread ate into me as I kicked the bay around the brush thickets and rode a circle roundabout to the well. I thanked the Lord then that He hadn't let me fall in love with Martha....

THE WEST-BOUND stage was rattling through the corral gate. Martha came out of the station room with her bag clutched in her hand while I was still rigging the stage horses. I let my eyes stay on her searchingly and asked, "You want me to help you with Jack?"

"Thank you, Windon," she said, "it won't be necessary."

Back she went after the gambler. Damn her for a cold blooded liar, I thought; damn her to hell and perdition if I'd ever seen such a smooth one!

But presently all the gentleness she'd shown me came back. All the things we'd talked about returned sharp in memory and put me in a more forgiving mood. Something inside rebelled when I tried to blame her. Maybe she hadn't been able to do much about the way things turned out; perhaps this was another case of destiny writing out its own strange story. She had courage, that girl. Just plain old fashioned cast-iron guts!

She returned into the yard's darkness giving the gambler the aid of her arm as they stepped to the coach. I kept my direct look off them, my face tightening. For a moment I talked with the driver who had already climbed to his seat.

"Better tell the station keeper at San Simon to ride over once in a while."

His eyes were beetling as he looked down at me. "What's the matter? Too tough for you?"

I felt my face burn but I wasn't going to let his needling get me. My voice sounded pretty tight as I forced out an answer. "I'll tend the horses and feed them well before I leave."

He cussed something unintelligible beneath his breath and kicked off the brake. Then Martha was leaning from the window, her cheeks white and grave and carrying the old expression I remembered best. It was the expression I had come to believe was something she wore just when we were close to each other spiritually.

"Goodby, Windon," she murmured. "Thank you for everything. I'll never forget."

"Good luck, Martha," I answered.

And then as they began wheeling out of the yard I took one quick look at her compainion. He was in the shadowy gloom of the coach but only a blind man could have missed it. He wore Jack's clothes, his hat, and he was hiding himself partially against the shabby seatback; but it wasn't the same man that two days ago had brought her to Stein's Station. This was a fellow I'd never seen before in my life....

AFTER THE rattle of that old Abbot-Downing coach died out in Doubtful Canyon I picked up a shovel and walked across the desert to where the gelding had shied. All the time I was trying to piece together how it happened.

Sometime last night after I'd said good night to her he must have arrived. Jack had either been dead by this time or they'd killed him—and this was the part that unsettled me the moment I connected it with Martha. It could have been done with a knife or a gun barrel on the head; I hoped Martha hadn't known about that part until it was over. In any event, they had carried his body out beyond the well where I'd come upon it while riding the bay.

This new companion of Martha's must have arrived before I heard their voices. Maybe I had wakened to her door squealing after he came back from hauling the corpse into the thickets.

I thought over the way Martha had confronted the marshal. She had seen that lawman riding up, the same as I

had, and I decided now she had seen both of these men coming up the trail. There was a narrow window in her room which the builders had worked into the thick stone masonry for use in fighting off Apache attacks, and she must have been standing beneath it looking across the desert all the time I pictured her lying beside Jack.

But had she been expecting this second man? Had it all been part of a preconceived plan? This I doubted, as I reviewed the way she had responded to me. She had been lonely, and afraid, and the things we had done together had been genuine even though the feeling behind them was of a transient nature.

No, Martha might have been hoping for this second man's appearance, but there had been little probability in her mind that her hopes would materialize. I reduced it down to this much and decided I would never know anything further of Martha and her lover who finally had trailed her as far as Stein's Station.

I dug Jack a shallow grave beneath the thicket and rolled him in. Curiosity dragged at me to find out how he had died. But I couldn't examine Jack without disturbing the entire mental image I held of Martha. If I proved they used a knife I would forever picture her crowded against the wall hiding her face while her lover drove home his blade into the one who had first brought her here.

Or had she stood watching, her avid eyes driving her lover on? I couldn't build to thoughts already as disturbing as these, and I covered Jack without looking at him. I much preferred to believe he had been dead when Martha's lover arrived.

AFTER I had finished I walked the stage horses down to the well. Another saddle horse had come in while I'd been digging the grave, this one a tall, powerfully built gray still carrying a Llano saddle that was double rigged. I loosened the latigo while the animal made sucking sounds with his muzzle beneath the water.... It was not difficult to surmise this gray had been run off into the hills by Martha's lover, having been drawn back only by the need for water.

Once the stage horses had been tended I took the saddle from the gray and threw it across the bay gelding. For a while I had played with the thought of riding out on the gray. But I put the idea aside. This horse carried a cattleman's brand, a Texas horse, and he'd probably been stolen. Of course, I didn't know what kind of hell I would stir because of the bay gelding, but this was my choice for the wander-trail.

I transferred the bridle, then turned still while the fresh sounds of horsemen drifted in from the hills. My fingers dropped against my gun butt, then fell away. If the marshal was riding back wanting me I would still give him his chance to talk.

I moved silently along the wall shadow until I reached the gate. I saw them clearly then, three rangy riders wearing gun belts and carbines beneath their knees. Fear telegraphed a message to

my brain: A posse! But were they after me?

I kept the cold dread that gnawed through my insides from reaching the surface, held my voice on a smooth level. "Evening, Gents. Water?"

The foremost shook his head, a thick-set lumbering giant atop a roan horse. "Watered up back a piece. Just ridin' along, man that pushes his horse in these hills kills him fast. You see anybody poundin' leather this way?"

I read them as men geared for a long hunt. "Lots of men drifting," I told the posse-man. "Just what kind of gent do you have in mind?"

He ran his hands around the top of his saddle horn, leaning forward while he stared at me hard. He told it presently:

"A fellow shot a gambler called Jack of Hearts. They fought over a trollop, and Jack jumped the Tucson stage taking the woman with him. He was hit, but not too bad. It wouldn't make much difference, because Mesilla was glad to get rid of them both. But the sheriff put the other gent back of bars so's he wouldn't go shootin' hell out of the country. In the morning our sheriff's dead; we're ridin' after this fellow."

I didn't say anything, the incidents preceding Martha's arrival at my station all at once becoming clear to me. She had made up to Jack thinking his bankroll was big enough to buy her the luxuries she wanted. But her first lover had been goaded into going for his gun, had shot Jack. In the end she had chosen to go away with Jack, the lure of the gold in his satchel too much for her to relinquish.

"You wonderin' how a gent back of bars could kill a lawman?" the rider atop his roan was asking as he glared at me. "He was strangled, Mister. With his bare hands this gent choked the life out of our sheriff! We aim to get him, Mister."

Strangled, the man said! It burned, through me like a hot iron. The way life had of duplicating herself, the merry way she had of throwing her deuces! I was thinking of that high bluff where the men of Yuma had built their pen, of a guard we had left behind us; and I was thinking also of a gray horse in the corral, hoping the gambler's horse was well in the shadows.

"A gent riding a gray?" I asked casually.

The big man's eyes fairly popped. "Which way, Mister? Where'd he ride?"

Only the Lord knew why I did it. She'd been square enough with me; she'd sent a marshal chasing off my tracks knowing all the while I was a man riding the night trails! She'd told me things about herself that I doubted any other man in the Territories knew, and they had been little intimate reflections that a woman needed to tell when she was afraid and mentally looking eye-to-eye with her God.

I stared into the black sightless gut of Doubtful Canyon. *For you, Martha,* I thought. *I hope it works for you!* Then I tossed them my thumb across a shoulder, pointing them out a different direction from that Martha had taken.

THE MAN let out a gust of air his lungs had been holding. "You cut that, fellows? Shakespeare! They're all hightailin' after money; no wonder Laughlin's so set on buildin' a stageline after that silver!"

His words drilled through me like whiskey heating the belly. But I pushed my back coolly against the corral wall and tried to keep the heat from rasping my voice. "Laughlin? Who is he? I asked.

"He's in Mesilla, now, lookin' for wagons. He figures a road south of here through the Pyramids will pay off. Buildin' a shortcut through Stein's Pass—when it's open he claims it'll close this old cul-de-sac canyon and ei-

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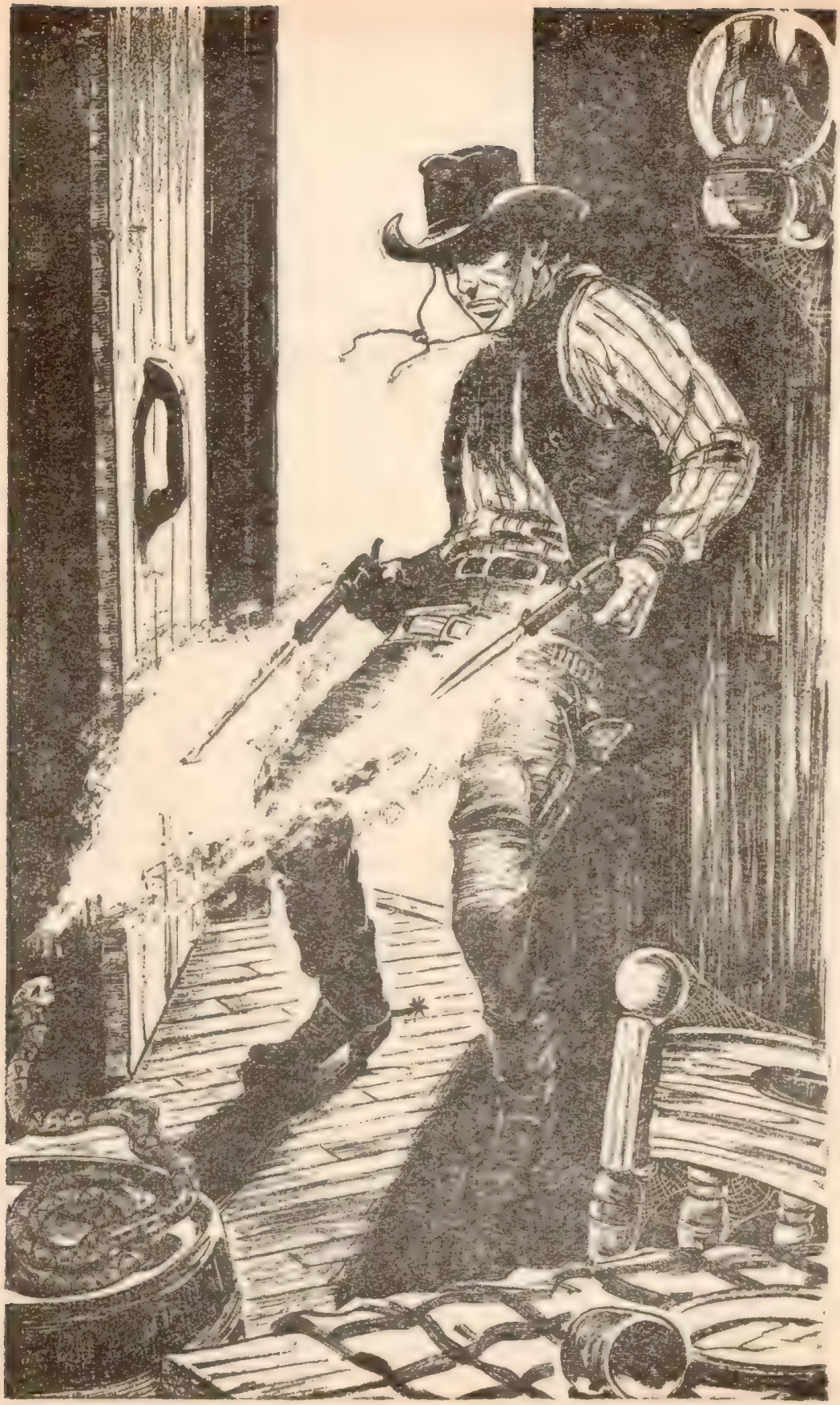

Complete Novelet

by GENE RODGERS

GUNPLAY AT GHOST RANCH

Matt Bishop had developed an interest in the old ghost ranch adjoining his property, just before he'd been killed. And young Art Bishop found that quite a number of people were interested in that property — willing to pay a handsome price for the option Art had taken out, and threatening murder if he wouldn't accept!

THE MOMENT Art Bishop stepped down from the stagecoach, he sensed that something was wrong. His father's letter, which Art had read a dozen times during the trip, was in his pocket, and the lean, dark-haired youth reached for the well-wrinkled paper.

"I'll be at the depot to meet you, come hell or high water," Art read half-aloud. "I've something to tell you, and it will be best said as soon as possible."

Art waited several minutes, started nervously when he saw a buckboard driving down the dusty street, but sank

back onto the wooden bench when it turned off and headed down a side street before it reached him.

Art recalled his father's boasting remark that "the word of Matt Bishop is as good as his bond," and wondered why his father wasn't there to meet him. Glancing at the clock in the waiting room, Art noticed that the stage had arrived fully forty minutes late; it was not like his father to be almost an hour late for an appointment—especially one as important as the letter claimed this meeting to be.

Settling back on the hard, hand-hewn bench, Art rolled a cigaret, fired up, and drew deeply. He glanced through the low window on his right, and marvelled at how the town had changed since he had left.

It had been his father's desire to see Art through college, a chance which old Matt had never gotten. Matt had often said that a college education afforded a young man the kind of chance that few men had, and with this opportunity, Matt intended turning the ranch over to Art when he returned from the East.

For a while, Art had rebelled against the idea. Finally, four long years before, he had acceded to his father's wishes. Art had expected to stay back East for a month or two more, but the urgency of his father's letter had brought him back to Hell's Peak as soon as he was able to wind up his affairs.

But Art wondered, *where is Dad?* The feeling of uneasiness now washed over him, and he puzzled for several minutes over his dread and apprehension.

The sky outside was turning an angry grey, and Art knew that wind and rain would soon follow, turning the streets into a quagmire of muck, making travel over the winding road back to the ranch practically impossible.

Art knew that his father would want him to wait at the depot, but another glance at the clock told the youth that his father was already an hour and fifteen minutes overdue. And for a man to whom promptness was next to Godliness, Art realized that something urgent or important must have delayed him.

The sky was now turning ugly, and Art guessed that it would not be long before the storm let loose. He crushed his cigaret out under his bootheel, then paced nervously up and down in the confines of the dingy waiting room.

It wasn't until Art glanced through the open door and saw Sheriff Jay Taylor coming toward the depot that the youth knew—almost as a certainty—that Matt Bishop would not be coming.

THE SHERIFF clomped up the short flight of steps, glanced at the youth, and thumbed his Stetson back on his head. Art remembered the lawman, and his half-hearted grin at seeing the sheriff soon was lost in the greeting which the greying oldster mumbled.

"Your father won't be coming to meet you, son," the lawman said. "I hate to have to ruin a homecoming like this—what with Matt's bragging how he was going to meet you, and all, but the fact is, well—"

"He's dead, isn't he?" Art asked.

"I—how did you know?" the sheriff asked.

"I had a feeling," Art said. "What happened?"

"Three weeks ago, it was," the lawman said, eyes boring into Art's now whitened features. "Matt always had a hankering to buy the adjoining section of land, and he rode over there to look the place over. You know what that ghost ranch is like, don't you, son?" Without waiting for a reply, the stocky lawman continued, "Nobody found him for a long time, what with everybody steering clear of the old place. Finally, when Matt didn't show up at the ranch for over two days, they began to hunt for him."

The sheriff scraped his boots on the wooden floor, toyed with the star on his vest so as to avoid Art's eyes, then said, "They found him a week later up at the ghost ranch. Nobody thought to look there, but your father's foreman, Ben Webber, got a notion to look for him up there."

"How—how did it happen?" Art asked.

"You sure you want it straight, son?" the lawman asked.

"I might as well hear it now," Art answered, and he noticed that the palms of his hands were sweaty.

"He was found on the porch, a few feet from the door," the sheriff said. "He—well, there was a knife in his back, and there were a couple of .45 slugs in him, too."

"That's all?" Art asked. "I mean, didn't you find out who it was?"

"No, son," the lawman answered. "The trail had been cold for over a week before we found him, and the anim—"

"Go ahead," Art said, "I want to hear it all."

"Well," the sheriff shifted his feet again, "the animals weren't too particular what they fed on, you know. We searched the body, and found everything intact. Robbery wasn't the reason; your father was a well-liked and respected man around Hell's Peak."

Storm clouds let loose in a torrential-force rain, and the churning of mud and slime under boots and hoofs outside escaped the notice of the two men.

Art rubbed his face with a ham-like hand, then asked, "Weren't there any saddletramps or bums on the loose about the time when—"

"No," the sheriff cut in, "but we combed the town when we found the body. The only drifter we could find had been in jail all week on a disorderly drunk charge, and had been released the day we found the body."

"Didn't father have any enemies; someone who had fought with him lately?" Art asked.

"You knew your father, son," the lawman said. "He wasn't the kind to go having fights with many people. No, I'd swear he didn't make any enemies we didn't know about."

Art remembered the letter then, and reached into his pocket for it. "Here, Sheriff, look at this." He shoved the crumpled paper into the other man's hand, then added, "You can see why I feel that he had an enemy we didn't know about."

The sheriff read the letter, folded it neatly, then handed it back to Art. "I see what you mean, son, but we *still* can't suspect anyone. Your father just didn't go around making enemies. Hell, a kind, gentle sort like he was—you know what I mean, don't you?"

"Yes," Art said.

"What are you going to do now, son?"

"I'm going to catch that killer."

"Now, don't go flyin' off half-cocked," the sheriff said kindly. "I'm paid to be the snooper around here, and with you meddlin' in everything, it won't help any. No, son," the sheriff said firmly, "you won't catch your father's killer; that's my job. Your job is waiting for you up at the ranch—your ranch, now."

"I never thought of it as being my ranch," Art said. "But I guess it is now."

"Why don't you stay in town tonight, Art," the sheriff suggested. "No sense in going up there now, in this weather, and having to spend the night all alone."

"Thanks, but I want to get back as soon as I can," Art said. "Staying in town one night will be that much more time wasted. And that killer will be a free man one night more, too. Thanks, Sheriff, but I want to start as soon—"

"I thought you gave up that crazy idea of trying to catch the killer," the sheriff said. "You seem to be a sensible lad," the lawman said, rolling a cigaret in rough, calloused hands. "You've just got back home after four years, and

now you want to go chasing all over town looking for a man you don't even know."

"Sheriff," Art said without expression, "would you be content sitting next to the fireplace—just *sitting*—when your father's killer is roaming around, a free man?"

"Well, son, that's—"

"No," Art countered, "it's not different. I have a feeling, down here in the pit of my belly," he pointed his finger, "and I feel like grabbing something—somebody—and kicking the—"

"Yes, I know," the lawman said. "But all that'll get you is a week in my jail, and that doesn't catch a killer."

"I guess I'll be heading back, then," Art said. "Where can I hire a horse, Sheriff?"

"The livery's still in the same place, son," the sheriff said. "Oh, before I forget, I brought the stuff we found on—the body, son. I sort of figured you'd want it." He reached into his pocket, pulled out a small envelope, and handed it to the youth.

After tearing open the flap, Art spread out the meager belongings on the bench next to him. After a moment, he looked up at the sheriff, eyes suddenly grim and hard. "My father was killed by a local man, Sheriff, and I'll find him."

"How do you figure that a local man did it?" the sheriff asked.

"Look at this," Art said, holding a double-eagle between his fingers. Even in the grey day, light sparkled over the coin's surface.

"I don't get it," the lawman said.

"My father had a habit, Sheriff," Art explained. "He never accepted gold coins in change. He always said that it weighed him down; he took paper money, or he took none at all."

"And?"

"Just look at this stuff," Art said, pointing to a handful of gold coins. "Father never would have carried it with him, believe me."

"Then, where did he get it, I wonder," the sheriff said.

"In one of two places," Art said coldly. "He either got it from the killer, or he picked it up at the ghost ranch." Tugging the brim of his hat with a determined hand, Art strode out into the lashing rain.

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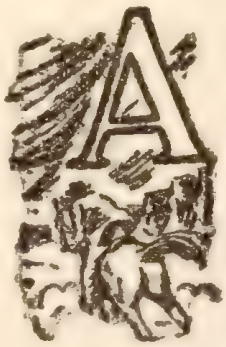


ART SPENT the next two days at the Lazy J, talking with his father's foreman, Ben Webber, and getting acclimated with the business end of running the spread. The balding, moon-faced foreman seemed pleased with Art's handling of the books, and soon agreed that he should turn over the paper work to the youth.

"Art," he said the second afternoon following the return of the younger man, "ain'tcha been up to the ghost ranch yet?"

"Yes," came the reply, "but I just wanted to get a look at the place. It's sure a spooky place."

"Ain't gonna argue thet," the foreman said.

"Tell me, Ben," Art said, "how did it get run-down like that?"

"Well," Ben said, "the folks thet lived up there, name of Lishkey, they died 'bout two years ago. The bank held a mortgage on the place, an' they sold the stock for back payment. Nobody wanted the ranch, so the bank's kept title to it. Your father wanted to buy the place, I hear. Even spoke to the banker 'bout it, an' prob'ly was up there lookin' it over when he was killed."

"Did you ever see father carrying gold coins, Ben?" Art asked.

"Shucks, boy," Ben said with a half-smile. "You know yer father never took to them gold coins. Never knowed

him to carry any wit' him, an' I been top hand here since you was a button. Why'd you ask?"

"Sheriff Taylor gave me these," he showed Ben the coins, "and told me that father had these on him when they found him."

"Ain't like him," Ben said.

"That's what I thought," Art replied. "And after I take another good look at the ghost ranch, I'm going into town to talk with the banker."

"Carter's a slimy weasel, he is," Ben said; "he'd sooner spit at you'n look at you, I say."

"That doesn't mean he killed father," Art said. "And it doesn't mean he *didn't*, either."

Art got up from the table, buckled on his gunbelt, and turned back to Ben. "I'm going up to the ghost ranch now," he said. "If I'm not back by sundown, come after me. I'm going to tear the place apart."

"Whatcha expect to find?" Ben asked.

"I really don't know," Art replied, "but whatever it is, I have a hunch that it will bring me one step closer to the killer."

"Want me to come with you?"

"No, Ben," Art said. "If we both go and get done in, who'll be left to run the Lazy J?"

"Never thought of that," Ben said. And as Art opened the door, the foreman added, "Be careful, boy."

"I will," came floating back into the room.

Ben heard Art clomping noisily down the stairs, and he moved to the doorway as Art saddled the gelding in the yard. "Listen, Art, to a bit of advice. They's a long way 'round to the ghost ranch, but it's safer; no sense takin' chances, you know. 'Stead of goin' down the road, take out across the south pasture and into the brush. That'll fetch you up the back way."

Art was tightening the cinch, but looked up at the foreman. "You don't mean to tell me that you think I'll get bushwhacked, do you, Ben?"

"I don't mean nothin'," came the reply. "But since your father was killed, they's no sense bein' foolish; you know, I buried a passel of foolisher men'n me."

"All right," Art said.

"An' fill that leather on yer saddle, boy," Ben suggested. "Iffin you *is* bushwhacked, they's no percentage in gettin' caught without a rifle. Even you should know a .45 ain't much good 'gin a rifle."

Art flushed, then nodded. "I guess I was a bit anxious," he said.

"I know," Ben replied. "Foolish men an' anxious ones— I planted a heap of 'em." Ben went back into the house, took a Winchester from its pegs on the wall, and brought it out to Art. "This was your father's; I don't reckon he'd mind you totin' it."

Art looked into the foreman's eyes again. "Thanks, Ben."

"Hell," Ben flushed under the glance, "any danged fool'd know enough to carry a rifle."

"Four years in Philadelphia gets a man out of the habit," Art smiled.

"Like I said," Ben grinned, "I planted all kinds; even college boys."

"So long," Art said, swinging into the saddle.

"I'll be after you at sundown iffin you ain't back by then," Ben called out.

But Art was already too far away to hear the foreman's promise.

IT TOOK nearly an hour for Art to circle around to the back of the ghost ranch, and the thorns that leeched onto his trouser legs and scraped off his boots hardly seemed worth the precaution he was taking.

The deserted ranch house, a low, one-story affair, sagged on worn, rotted timbers. The windows were patched with old rags, and the porch logs had long buckled and broken underfoot. Art dismounted at the side of

the house, took the Winchester from his saddle, and had a cocked .45 in his hand as he circled to the front.

A dull, moaning wind was Art's sole companion aside from the horse that nickered nervously beside the house. Art walked slowly around to the front, then considered his position, and retraced his steps to the back of the house.

A door stood ajar, and Art moved through it. Rats scurried for safety as Art entered, and a sparrow flew at the broken window as it tried to escape from the confines of the kitchen.

A sound attracted Art's attention in the next room, and he slowly moved to the door, pushed it open swiftly, and leaped to one side. Nothing came from within, and only Art's ragged breathing cut the stillness. Art removed his hat, put it on the business-end of the rifle, and pushed it into the open doorway. Nothing happened.

Art turned, clamped his hat back on his sweaty head and gently set the rifle on a dusty table behind him. Drawing his other .45, Art moved cautiously toward the door. He edged through it, eyes darting to right and left. With a gasp of relief, Art saw a snake curled in the far corner of the room. Art yanked the hammer back on the .45 in his left hand, fired both guns simultaneously, and watched as the snake stretched out grotesquely on the floor.

Art knew that the snake's mate would soon be investigating, and the youth chose to leave before the dead rattler attracted attention. There was a door leading off the small room, and Art moved toward it. He eased the rusty hinges into life, and pushed into the nearly-dark room. Cobwebs hung from the ceiling and walls, and Art walked into a maze of them, then disgustedly pulled the clinging stuff from his head and shoulders. Art found a candle stub, lit it, and held it up to see the room.

It was closed on all but the side from which he had entered, and a trap door led down to the basement. Art considered going down the steps that yawned invitingly at him, shuddered imperceptibly, and chose to ignore their invitation.

Art snuffed out the candle, jammed it into his pocket, and backed out of the room. He spent nearly a half hour in searching the other rooms of the house, but found nothing that could offer any clue. Finally, Art moved back to the dingy room. He relit the candle, moved hesitantly toward the trap door, and stopped. Again, he debated the idea of going down, but when he recalled the sheriff's words, "a knife in his back," Art made up his mind, but not without a measure of reluctance.

The crooked steps sagged under his weight, but Art descended the ladder until he stood on the hard-packed earth floor. There was an oppressive smell, as well as tremendous heat, down in the cellar, and the cobwebs and darkness added to Art's uneasiness. Flickering shadows from the candle in his hand danced in the corners, throwing everyday objects out of proportion, and Art shuddered involuntarily.

A sack of rotted potatoes sat against one wall, and Art saw a rat glide out of the torn sack and scurry through a small hole in the wall behind it. A rusted shovel and other gear were strewn haphazardly on the floor, and a pile of brown wood was heaped against the far wall.

Art poked into the dark recesses, not knowing what he was looking for, but ever-certain that whatever it was, it would be found in this deserted house.

The sweat now streamed down his

back, his forehead and arms. Art rubbed his sleeve over his eyes, and the candle winked out. Art stood frozen with fear as he fumbled in his pockets, finally relit the candle. His .45s were now forgotten, nestling in their holsters, and Art kept looking through the dark cellar.

Art's hopes brightened immeasureably as he noticed that a shovel had been cast into a barrel in the corner. He moved over to the container, peered in. The shovel was almost new, and the bright glint of metal shone in the semi-darkness. Fresh dirt was caked on its edges, and Art knew that someone had been in the house recently.

Art bent to pick up the shovel, turned it over in his hand. The dirt was hard-caked, and the youth estimated that it had been several weeks at the very least, since the shovel had been used.

Again, Art looked into the barrel, but found nothing except a few rags and a thin layer of dirt on the bottom. A crushed cigaret attracted his attention, and Art picked it up. He rolled the hand-made between two fingers next to his ear, and heard the grating of stale tobacco. A match that was moist from the floor gave the youth further evidence that no one had been in the house for several weeks.

Art moved back to the ladder, gingerly climbed it, and sucked in a lungfull of semi-fresh air. Sweat had already soaked through his shirt, and his face was beaded. Art brushed the accumulated cobwebs from his clothing, and looked about him.

Since his eyes, accustomed to the near-darkness of the cellar, now were more perceptive in the small room Art noticed the scrawlings on the wall. He moved closer to the wall, candle held eye-high.

"July, 1878," Art read. "Today, the ninth, this room was sealed. It is my wish that it will not be reopened for ten years after my death." Below the inscription, Art found the scrawled signature of "Chas. Lishkey."

Well, Art thought, *it has been opened.* And since it was now only three years since the date of the inscription, Art further knew that the wish of Chas. Lishkey—whoever he was—had been forgotten.

Then Art recalled the sheriff having told him of the death of the owners of the ranch two years before. Their names had been Lishkey, Art remembered. And the youth was willing to wager that the man's first name had been Charles.

The sun was already sinking outside, and Art knew that he would have to wait until another time to finish his search of the other ranch buildings. He thought of Ben's promise, then, that the foreman would come for him if Art had not returned by sundown.

Art went out into the daylight, and squinted against the sun's rays. He had been ready to vault into the saddle when he recalled that he had left his rifle in the house.

Disgustedly, Art dragged his weary foot out of the stirrup, moved back to the rear door. He moved inside, going toward the table in the kitchen where he had left his Winchester.

The rifle was gone.

3

THE FOLLOWING morning, Art rode into town to talk with the banker. He waited impatiently as the girl knocked on the door marked, *Private, Douglas Carter.*

After what seemed an interminable wait, Art was ushered in. A tall, rail-thin man stood up from behind the desk, stuck out a talon-like hand, and after shaking Art's hand, said, "I'm glad to see you, Bishop."

"I'll get right down to cases," Art said.

"Good," came the reply. "I like a man who gets to the point."

"I understand that my father was in to see you about buying the Lishkey place a few weeks before—"

"Yes, yes," Carter said.

"I wondered if he told you *why* he wanted to buy it?" Art asked.

Carter rubbed his thin, whisker-free face, then shook his sparsely-covered head. "Noooo, I don't recall his having mentioned his reasons to me."

"Well," Art sat on the edge of his chair, "do *you* have any idea?"

"No, I'm afraid I don't," Carter said. "He merely came in, asked the purchase price of the property, then wanted to know if the surveyor had made an inspection of the boundaries."

"Boundaries," Art said under his breath. "Since when did father become so worried about boundaries?"

"He was very insistent that I show the *exact* boundaries; he even went to the land agent and asked him to have the property re-surveyed," Carter said. "I hate to say this, son, but your father was getting on in life, so I chalked it all up to his years. He told me that he was thinking about adding to his property holdings, but it was only a short time later that he—well, he never did come back to complete the transfer."

"Then he actually intended to buy it?" Art asked.

"Yes," Carter said. "The bank has been holding title to that ranch for three years now, and no one ever evidenced any desire to purchase it. But, no sooner does your father— I mean, a few days ago, Oscar Hays came in to inquire about it."

"Who's he?" Art asked.

"He owns the Circle H on the other side of town. Runs cattle and the like," Carter said.

"Did he make a definite offer?" Art asked.

"I'm afraid," Carter smiled a liquid-thin attempt, "that such matters are held in confidence between a prospective buyer and the bank."

"Oh," Art said.

"I'll tell you this much," Carter offered. "Hays and his foreman, Will Jenner, will be in later this afternoon to talk further with me."

"I see," Art said.

"Of course," Carter countered, "since neither your father nor Hays has given a deposit against my selling the property, I am able to offer it to you."

"Is it possible to take an option on it?" Art asked. He smiled then, his mind reacting as Carter's face lit up. Matt Bishop hadn't been so wrong, Art agreed, in insisting that Art include business administration in his curriculum.

"Well," Carter hedged. "I don't know—"

"Would a five hundred dollar deposit give me a thirty-day option?" Art asked. Then, trying a new line of attack, "I don't know too much about this sort of thing, you see, Mr. Carter; I hope I am not asking you to do anything out of the ordinary."

Carter instantly flared. "This is not at all out of the ordinary."

Art suppressed a grin. "Then I may have an option?"

Carter fumed and fizzled, but he was in a corner now. "Very well," he finally blurted. "Five hundred dollars on deposit by tomorrow noon, and you shall have a thirty-day option."

"I have the money with me," Art said, trying to disguise his smile. "I may as well deposit it right now, Mr. Carter."

The banker looked up, watched as Art peeled five one-hundred dollar bills from his roll, and the youth handed the money across the desk.

"Since I'm here," Art added, "I may as well take the option papers with me."

Disgustedly, the banker went out of the room. Ten minutes later, Art

tucked the paper into his shirt, then rose. "You are a gentleman, Mr. Carter," he said. "I shall do all my business with your bank." Almost as if on second thought, he added, "In case Oscar Hays is disappointed, you might tell him that I'll be over at the cafe getting a bite to eat. I'll be at the mercantile later, and he can contact me there if he wishes."

"I'll tell him," Carter mumbled grimly. "Good day."

"Just one more thing," Art said. "I was curious as to just where you were yesterday afternoon."

"That's a strange question," the banker answered.

"I have a good reason for asking," Art replied.

"Let me see," Carter said, his brow in a knot. "I was over at the railroad station about noon, and I handled a cattle-transfer later. The better part of the day was spent, if I recall, in preparing for our semi-annual audit."

"Do you like rifles?" Art asked.

"Now see here!"

"I just wondered," Art said.

"No, I do not like rifles," Carter fumed. "I never owned one, never fired one, and luckily, was never hit by one. Anything else?"

"No, Mr. Carter," Art said. "And thanks for answering my questions."

A thin veneer of affability washed over the banker. "Any time," he said.

"I'll remember that," Art said.

OSCAR HAYS, a short, owlish-looking man, came into the cafe before Art had finished his meal. Will Jenner, Hays' foreman, was a bear of a man, towering over Art, with a barrel-chest and huge, ape-like arms.

"You're Art Bishop?" Hays asked.

"That's right," came the reply. "You must be Oscar Hays."

The pot-bellied man drew a chair, motioned to Jenner to sit down, too, then edged closer to Art. "Youngster, I intend to buy that property."

"Your spread is on the other side of town, isn't it?" Art asked.

"Yes," Hays answered. "Why?"

"Well," Art began, "I can't see why you want to buy a few sections all the way across town. It doesn't make sense; the whole place is only four sections, and it hardly seems reasonable that you will run cattle over there."

Hay's face betrayed no thoughts. "I do not mean to be personal, young man," Hays grated, "but I feel that it is *strictly* my own business."

"I didn't mean it that way," Art smiled.

"No matter *how* you meant it," Hays rasped, "I don't like it."

"Aside from that," Art said coldly, "you want to buy it. However, I hold a thirty-day option on the property."

"I am aware of that," Hays said. "And I am fully prepared to make you an attractive offer for your option."

Art glanced at Jenner, who sat rock-still, eyes boring into the youth. Then, Art said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Hays, but I have no intention of selling or dropping the option."

"You paid five-hundred for it," Hays reminded. "I am willing to pay twice that amount if you will—"

"I thought that any transactions between the bank and a customer are held in confidence," Art cut in; "at least, that's what Carter told me a while ago."

Hays flushed, then said, "Let's stop beating around the bush. How much do you want for the option?"

"Is ten thousand too high?" Art asked.

"I'll pay ten thousand for it," Hays smiled.

"Well," Art said icily, "you won't pay *me* ten thousand for it, because I'm still not selling."

"There are other ways," Jenner said. "The boss don't want—"

"Shut up, Will!" Hays barked.

"A splendid idea," Art grinned.

"Why, you little—" Jenner began.

Hays cut in, "Go watch the horses, Will." And after the big man had moved away, rumbling profanely to himself, Hays said, "Jenner is right, youngster; there are other ways of getting the option. Now, let's be reasonable. I am willing to pay a very handsome price for the option. Why be stubborn? I'm going to get it—one way or another. Doesn't it seem like a smart idea to sell now, while you still are able to enjoy the money?"

"Is that a threat?" Art asked.

"Take it anyway you like it," Hays responded.

"I still say, no," Art said.

"Then why," Hays fumed, "did you tell Carter that you wanted to see me? If you want more money, just name your price. You'll find me a reasonable man."

"I merely told Carter where I could be reached," Art said. "Somehow, he must have construed the remark to mean that I wanted to see you. But now that you are here, Hays, let's get this straight. I won't be scared off by your threats, nor will I sell my option. I merely wanted to see how high you are willing to go. Now that I know, I'm even more positive that you won't get the option."

"Why won't you sell?" Hays asked.

"My father wanted to buy the property," Art explained hollowly. "No sooner does he make discreet inquiries, than he gets a knife in the back for his trouble. When I was up at the ghost ranch yesterday, somebody followed me and stole my rifle. Now, I'm a reasonable guy, too. But it only makes sense that there is something on that property—or under it—that makes it more valuable than just four sections of graze land. I'm a fool, maybe, but not *that* much of one."

"I see," Hays said. "I needn't tell you that I still intend to get that property."

"No," Art said, "you needn't. And you needn't try intimidating me, either; that won't work."

"One final offer," Hays countered. "I'll pay twenty-five thousand dollars for your option."

"Nice try," Art said.

"Damn you, Bishop," Hays grated. "You're making things difficult for me."

"It looks that way, doesn't it?"

"I'll have that land yet," Hays promised.

"Over my corpse," Art said.

"You know," Hays flicked his hat onto his head with a sweaty hand. "that *could* be arranged."

"You're welcome to try," Art said. "But if you'll excuse me now, I have things to do in town."

Hays got up, looked again at Art. "I'll be seeing you."

"No doubt," Art said.

Anger spread in a red welt on Hays' thick neck as he walked out of the cafe.

Art had made a dangerous foe, and he realized then that he would have to make another trip to the ghost ranch, and soon. He had to find out the reason for Hays' sudden interest in the property.

4

ART WAS digging post holes the next morning with Ben when a rider drew rein in the front yard and dismounted. Art did not know who the man was, and Ben whispered, "That's Lou Osterkorn, a no-good if ever I saw one. He owns the O-Bar-O on t'other side of the ghost ranch."

After the formalities, Art invited his visitor into the house, where the three men sat down for coffee. Osterkorn drank half of his cup, put it down on the table, and after drawing a grimy shirt sleeve over his walrus mustache, said, "I understand you got an option to the old Lishkey place."

"I'm getting pretty weary answering that question lately," Art said.

"Anybody else been askin' after it?" Osterkorn inquired.

"Yes."

"Whatcha want, Osterkorn?" Ben asked grumpily.

"I came to offer good hard cash for your option, Bishop," Osterkorn said. "Name your top bid, an' I'll go another thousand more."

"I was offered twenty five thousand by Oscar Hays yesterday," Art said, "and I turned him down. You can offer fifty, and I'll turn you down, too."

"Twenty five thousand!" Osterkorn whistled incredibly. "You must be yarnin'."

"Ask Hays," Ben spat.

"That's right," Art said. "You're wasting your time if you think I'll sell to you—or anybody else."

"Name your fee, Bishop," Osterkorn said.

"Can't you understan'?" Ben said. "Art jus' ain't sellin'."

"I'll go high," Osterkorn pleaded.

"No soap," Art said.

"All right," Osterkorn muttered, draining his cup. He slammed it down on the table, got his feet, and stalked to the door. As he opened the latch, he said. "But you'll be sorry."

"I've been hearing more than my share of that, too," Art said.

Still muttering to himself, Osterkorn moved outside, and moments later, the two men heard him thunder out of the yard.

Art drained his cup, poured a second, and after drinking that, he turned to Ben. "What's so valuable about the ghost ranch?"

"Dunno," Ben said. "A prospector was through a while ago, but he didn't find nothin'; no oil, no gold—nothin'."

"Is anyone thinking of building a railroad through there?" Art asked.

"Not likely," Ben said. "We already got us a railroad, an' nobody is gonna build another one, is they?"

"I suppose not," Art said. "But I still have to go back up there."

"I've gotta water the stock," Ben said. "The way the water is holdin' up, we'll be lucky to get through the summer."

"Say," Art brightened, "where does the water come from?"

"The creek, you fool," Ben said, grinning. "Where'd you s'ppose?"

"Does the creek supply water for just the Lazy J, or does it supply the whole town, too?"

"Never thought of that," Ben said. "That creek runs clear around the Peak. It supplies every ranch within a hunnert miles, almost."

"The whole town draws on it, right?" Art asked.

"Yeah," Ben said. "But I don't see why everybody'd wait till now to rush out an' buy up the old ghost ranch. There's a small creek over t'other side of town, but it only supplies water for the town itself. All the ranches use the creek water."

"But," Art said, "if the small creek were to dry up, then what?"

"Then," Ben said, "the man that owned the creek—or the head of it, at any rate, he'd—"

"Did you hear mention lately that the small creek was drying up?" Art asked.

"Yes!" Ben said excitedly.

A thought wormed its way into Art's mind. "When I was poking around in the cellar of the ghost house, I remember that the floor was moist. Maybe the small creek near town is supplied by an artery from the head of the main creek. Maybe they want to change the direction of the small creek, and cut the town off."

"That must be it," Ben said.

"Carter must have dreamed the scheme up, and told it to Hays. But Osterkorn found out somehow, and now he wants to buy in," Art said.

"But why can't they just move in and change the channel now?" Ben asked.

"It's probably a matter of blasting," Art said. "The ground is pretty rocky, you know. There's probably a rock shelf a few hundred feet below the surface of the ground. If anyone wanted to change the channel, they'd have to blow a hunk out of the rock. And blasting a rock ledge would take a lot of time—and it would make a lot of noise.

"But," Art continued, "if a man owned the property, he could just claim to be blowing three stumps out of the ground; and once the channel was diverted, the owner of the property could make a fortune. Now I see why the sudden interest in the ghost ranch."

"Then either Hays or Carter killed old Matt," Ben said.

"That's right," Art said. "Osterkorn would have tried to make a deal at the bank sooner—if he could—but he'd have had to know about the water sooner. No, it wasn't Osterkorn."

"Now what?" Ben asked.

"Well," Art said, tugging at his dark hair, "I think it's high time you and I made a trip up to the ghost ranch to have a look at the water route. I found shovel marks in the cellar; whoever it is, they've already started work." He looked at the empty pegs on the wall. "And I'm rather anxious to get Dad's rifle back, too."

"When do we go?" Ben asked.

"Right now," Art said.

THE SUN had reached its zenith before the two men drew rein in a sheltered draw back of the deserted ranch house. They waited several minutes after tethering their horses, and seeing no sign of life, they cautiously advanced.

Circling the house slowly, they

stopped at the porch steps. Art motioned Ben to move closer, then said, "The porch, Ben; last time I was here, it wasn't broken as badly as it is now."

"Do you think somebody is in there?" Ben asked.

"No," came the reply. "We'd have heard or seen something by now."

Art told Ben to wait in front of the house, then the youth circled to the rear, pushed the door open, and moved inside. After a quick look around, he shouted, "All right, Ben, come on in."

Ben clomped inside, then joined Art in the rear room. "Awful musty, ain't it?"

"You're telling me," Art grinned.

"Let's have us a look in the cellar," Ben said, moving through the room where Art had killed the snake.

"Grab a candle first," Art warned. "There's no light down there."

Ben rummaged in the sagging cupboards, finally coming up with two bits of candle-ends. "This oughtta do it," he said, handing one to Art.

Soon, they were in the room with the trap door. Art held his candle above his shoulders while Ben descended into the yawning pit of darkness. The youth's eyes roved about him as Ben grunted down the rickety ladder, and his eyes fell on the inscription scrawled on the wall. "July, 1878," Art read again. "Today, the ninth, this room was sealed. It is my wish that it will not be reopened for ten years after my

death." Then, his eyes skipped down to the signature, "Chas. Lishkey."

Art found himself wondering why Lishkey would write something like that on a blank wall, especially when the room was *not* sealed. Art moved over to the doorway, examined the door and the lock. It was of standard variety, and Art could find no trace of it having ever been sealed.

"Come on, Art!" Ben called from below.

"In a minute," Art answered. He moved over to the wall again, and held the candle at the base of the wall. A thin line of cement was in evidence. The wall had sagged, and the newly-exposed base showed the edge of the cement lining.

His interest aroused now, Art examined the juncture of the wall with the other walls and the ceiling. He found the same traces on all edges of the wall.

Finally, at a loss to explain the strange sight, Art moved down the ladder. He walked to the wall in back of the ladder, and saw three heavy oak braces supporting the ceiling, which was also cemented.

Ben was wielding the shovel where the original hole had been, but soon stopped. "This barrel," Ben pointed to the wooden cask in which Art had originally found the shovel, "was used to drag dirt out of here through the window."

Art glanced through the window, and saw faint traces of where the barrel had been pulled along the ground. An ineffectual attempt had been made to smooth out the markings.

"Did you uncover anything?" Art asked.

"Nope," Ben said. "All I got was a good sweat and blistered hands."

"But why would anyone want to dig a hole there?" Art asked. He stepped back three steps, leaned against the oak braces. "This whole thing puzzles me."

"What's that?" Ben asked.

"I don't know," Art said. "Wouldn't it be simpler to dig a hole *outside* the house, and set a charge in there?"

"But they're protected in here," Ben said. "They ain't nobody gonna watch what they're doin' when they're inside the house."

"I suppose you're right," Art muttered. "Anyhow, we'd better dig that hole a little deeper, just to see if there's anything buried."

Both men took shovels, and began to dig. Half an hour later, they had turned over a large amount of dirt, and had filled the barrel three times. Now, with a hole nearly four feet deep and half as wide, they sat back, and rolled cigarets.

"Nothin' here," Ben said.

"I'm afraid you're right," Art said.

"What'll we do now?" Ben asked.

"I'm going to poke around down here a while," Art said. "You might be able to find something upstairs that I missed."

"That's fine with me," Ben grinned. "I don't cotton to this cellar no ways. It's lighter up there, an' I sorta like to see what I'm doin'."

"I'll be up shortly," Art said, and watched as his foreman moved quickly up the worn rungs of the ladder.

Art heard Ben's boots clomping about hollowly above him, and the youth turned to continue his search. He walked over to the wall, estimated that the cement-lined wall above was in a straight line vertically with the oak braces, and saw that this was the only part of the cellar that had more than one brace so closely bunched.

The oak pillars were set about fifteen feet apart from each other—except for the trio that stood no more than two or three feet apart behind the ladder. Art wondered why the builder would add support at that one particular portion of the cellar, but gave up. The heat soon broke Art's determination, and he was half-way

up the ladder when he heard Ben's voice calling to him.

"What's up, Ben?" Art called.

"Come on up; quick!"

Art scrambled up the steps, called to Ben, "Where are you?"

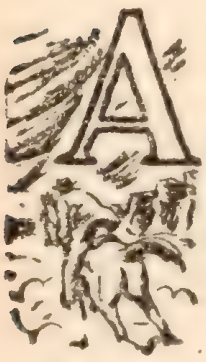
"In back," came the reply. "In the kitchen!"

Art moved out of the small room, through the well-lighted room where the dead rattler lay, and into the kitchen. "What's all the commotion for, Ben?"

"Look!"

Art looked. There on the kitchen table lay his father's rifle.

5



A CLOAK of silence lay heavy on the two sweaty men. Art walked over to the table, hefted the rifle in his hands. He turned it over, saw the initials MB burned into the stock, then replaced it on the table.

"Somebody was here while we were down in the cellar," Art gasped.

"It looks that way," Ben said, his eyes widened.

Neither man knew what to think—or say. Thoughts tumbled over each other in Art's mind, and one in particular burned brighter than the rest. Finally, Art brightened. "Ben, you've never been in here before, have you?"

"No."

"Then let me show you something," Art said, leading Ben through the door and out into the clear day.

"What do you wanna show me?" Ben asked.

"Can you see where our horses are?" Art asked.

"No, I can't."

"Maybe the man who sneaked in while we were downstairs found our horses, and drove them off. You'd better go down there and take a look." Art suggested.

"Yeah," Ben said. "Maybe he hid in the brush, waited a while, then snuck into the kitchen. I'll go look."

"Good idea," Art said. "And while you're there, bring my canteen, will you?"

"Sure," Ben said, then started off toward the horses.

Art finished his cigaret, crushed it out, and went back into the house. He examined the cemented wall again, then made his way into the room behind the wall. It was a well-lighted, airy room, but it measured only eight-by-six feet.

Somehow, things didn't sit right in Art's mind. He remembered a class in handicrafts he had taken in college. What was it the professor had said? *"Very seldom will one find a room that has no light. Practically every room in every house will have at least one window, if not more."*

Art wondered why this room was so small, while the room on the opposite side of the wall was of a similar size, but without windows. One room is overly-bright; the other, nearly dark.

It was then that the answer struck. It did not come in bits and pieces, but like a cyclone, all in one tremendous flash of understanding. Everything had fallen into place, and all that remained was the unmasking of the culprit.

Art heard Ben returning, and moved into the kitchen to await his foreman, rolling a cigaret as he did. Ben's sweaty face soon was framed in the doorway. "The horses are still there," Ben reported. "And here's your your canteen."

Art took the canteen, opened it, and held it up to his lips. He sloshed the water about in his mouth, then spit it on the floor. "A trick they taught us in college," he explained. "Whenever your mouth is dry, first roll water around in it and spit it out. Then, you can drink."

"Smart idea," Ben agreed.

"And I found," Art added, "that the water tastes better that way."

Ben waited until Art had finished with the canteen, then said, "Now that we've dug up the cellar, and found nothing, what do we do next?"

"I want you to look at the wall inside," Art said. "I think there's something we missed."

"What?"

"Look first," Art said. "Ask questions later."

They moved through the kitchen into the small, dark room. Art held a candle for Ben to read by, then waited for his foreman to finish.

"I don't get it?" Ben said.

"It struck me as being odd that someone would put three oak braces so close together in the cellar, while all the rest are separated. It also seemed funny that the floor should sag in the middle, while the rest of it is flat. There are a few warped boards, true, but there are no sections of flooring that sag the way this does." Art pointed to the floor.

"So?" Ben asked.

"And why is there a room with no windows in it?" Art continued. "And why is this room so small; the room on the other side of the wall so small? I'll tell you; simply because this room and the other one are now two rooms, but they were originally only *one* room. In other words, they built this wall *after* the house was completed."

"I don't get it," Ben protested.

"The whole idea of this wall is to hide something, not to cut a good room in half. The inscription puzzled me. Finally, I figured out the true meaning; the *wall* was sealed, *not* the room. There are no cemented parts of the house except the wall. No other part of the house sags, except the wall. No other part of the house is supported by three braces in the cellar, except directly under this wall. Therefore," Art explained, "there must be a good reason why the wall was cemented and bolstered as it is."

"I don't know what it is," Ben said.

"I think you do," Art insisted vehemently. "After all, Ben, if you didn't know about this wall, or didn't at least have some idea as to what was sealed into this wall, then why did you take such a chance as you did?" Then, in a deadly voice, "Why did you kill my father?"

BEN SMILED wanly, then said, "For a minute there, you had me believin' you was serious."

"I am, Ben," Art said, "deadly serious."

"How could I kill Matt?" Ben asked.

"*Only* you could have killed him," Art said. "He was found with a knife in his back; that means that whoever did it was known to him, and trusted by him. Since he had an argument with nobody, and since only you knew where he was, only you could have followed him out here and killed him."

"So—you know," Ben said, drawing his .45s in the same motion. "I'll tell you the rest of it, too. That business about the water was so much hogwash; so you know what's sealed in that wall?"

"I rather suspect that there's gold in it," Art said. "That's the only way Father would have been found with gold coins in his pockets. I don't know who put it there, or how much there is, but I'll bet there is a load of it in there."

"That's right," Ben said. "Charles Lishkey sold goods to the Confederate forces during the war; he made a fortune, but he hid it—in there. Just the opposite of Matt, too. He didn't trust paper money. He insisted on payment in gold. Rather than have anyone find out, he hid it. When he figured that the end was near, he put the inscription on the wall."

"I was sure that you were the killer this afternoon," Art said. "You

claimed that you've never been in this house before, yet you knew where the room with the trap door was. And that rifle snitching; only you knew that I was coming here the other day, and by making me take a long, roundabout route, you were able to beat me here."

"You're pretty smart," Ben said.

"Just one thing more," Art asked. "Why did you bring Hays and Osterkorn in on the deal?"

"I snuck up on Matt outside, but I didn't know that anybody was here. Later, Hays and Osterkorn told me that they saw the whole thing, and wanted to turn me in. I had to promise them a cut; they agreed the day you first came snoopin' around here."

"Was it worth it, Ben?" Art asked, his head lowered in dejection. "Was it worth killing a man who thought of you like a brother?"

"Brother!" Ben said. "I worked that spread of his more'n he did, and I deserve the biggest share. But when I found that he was gonna buy this place, I had to kill him. But that letter to you; he showed it to me, and I knew I'd have to wait. Now, the time has come."

Art watched in horror at Matt's killer drew his thumb back on the hammer of the twin .45s in his hands. There was a sharp *click*, and Art knew that he had to make his move then—or not at all.

In desperation, Art flung the candle at Ben, ducked low on the floor at the same time, and rolled to the far wall. Gun flashes ignited the room, and Art watched as splinters flew from the floor board upon which he had been lying moments before.

The room was in pitch darkness now, and only the labored breathing of the two men punctuated the moments as they flew by. Art reached into his pocket, felt the empty cartridge shell he always carried as a good luck charm, and hurled it at the far wall.

As Ben turned to fire at the noise, Art rolled toward the trap door, and fell through before Ben discovered that he had been tricked. Down below, Art reached for his guns, checked the load, and waited in silence. He heard a creaking noise, then the slam of the trap door overhead.

Art's strained ears soon distinguished Ben's footsteps above. A candle was ignited, for Art saw its flickering through the floorboards. Again, the grating of wood-on-wood, and the trap door swung upwards. There was a harsh cry as Ben dropped the candle, and the light winked out.

Panic and fear suddenly fell away from Art's shoulders, and he stood erect, the sweat in his palms now forgotten. The candle flared into light again, and Ben roared, "I'm comin' down after you, boy!"

"I'll shoot you like a snake if you put one toe down the ladder!" Art answered.

"No, you won't shoot me," Ben said. "I brung you up, Art, an' took care of you. Me an' Matt; that was a private fight, an' it didn't concern you none."

Art tensed nervously, watched in fascination as Ben's booted foot appeared at the opening of the entryway. Art's hands were cold now, and he suddenly began to shiver, despite the oppressive heat. "Don't—don't come any further, Ben!"

"You won't shoot me," Ben said. "You couldn't shoot me."

Now, the top of one boot was in full view.

Art almost shook with fright, and his legs were turning into sponges beneath him. "Stop, Ben, or I'll shoot!"

"You won't shoot me!"

"I— I'm warning you—" And somehow, a gun roared. Art felt as if it were miles away, and he stared down in shock to see smoke curling out of the barrel of his gun.

Ben roared savagely, dropped the candle, and fell through the opening. It was dark except for the thin ray of

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Ike Jones and Doc Smith had had full enough lives; but Jack Franklin was young, and his pretty wife made the two oldsters remember their youth. Something had to be done, or Kerrie Franklin would soon be a widow.

THE RUSTY GUN

by Lee Floren

IKE JONES was planing down a piece of pine lumber when the harsh voice, coming from the door of his workshop, broke his thoughts into a thousand pieces. "I got a job for you, Ike!"

The cabinet-maker looked up at the big man who stood there in the doorway, and he scowled in anger. "What do you want, Big Ed Hamilton?"

Big Ed's gaze traveled around the workshop, taking in the battered bench and the neatly-piled lumber.

"Well, what is this job, Big Ed?"

The dull eyes came back to the cabinet-maker. "How tall is Jack Franklin?"

Something sinister lurked behind the apparently harmless question. "Why ask me?"

"I've seen you glance at a man and estimate his height to the inch before you hammered out a coffin for him. An' that coffin fitted him like a tailor-made suit."

"But Jack Hamilton ain't dead, 'cause I saw him ride out of town about fifteen minutes back."

"He ain't dead...yet. I only asked you how tall he is."

Ike Jones hid his consternation by biting off a chew of Horseshoe. Jack was only twenty-one; his wife, pretty Kerrie, was only twenty. Kerrie Franklin's girlish beauty momentarily flicked across Ike's memory. "He's about six-one, Big Ed."

"Build a coffin to fit him. I'll pay good for it. Start it right off; it might be used sudden..."

Hamilton turned, but Ike Jones' words stopped him. "You're a dirty devil, Big Ed!"

Big Ed looked coldly at the carpen-

ter. "I'll let that ride, Ike. You're over sixty. If you were a young man...I'd beat the hell outa you..."

"I'm not too danged old!"

Big Ed shook his head. "Too old for a younger man like me to beat up. Well, make that coffin, and do it pronto..."

Big Ed went down the street and entered the *Broken Latigo Saloon.* Ike Jones decided it was time he had a talk with his crony, Doc Smith.

Doc sat in his swivel chair with his old boots on his old desk. His short fingers were laced across his pot belly. "You been running, Ike."

"How did you know? I'm not puffin'!"

"The pupils of your eyes are dilated."

"Forgit my eyes, you ol' fossil." Hurriedly Ike told about the talk with Big Ed. "Big Ed or one of his hired killers must aim to kill Jack, eh?"

Doc Smith's boots dropped to the floor and he reached under his chair for his jug, eyes on Ike Jones. "Figured this was coming," he said.

"What do you mean?"

The doctor uncorked his jug. "Right before he left town, Jack beat up on Smoky Maloney. Hell, you know as well as I do that Maloney is Hamilton's range-boss. Beat him up in the *Broken Latigo.*"

Ike Jones rubbed his whiskery jaw. "I saw Jack close when he rode out; he sure didn't look like he'd been in a fight."

"He only got hit once. In the mouth."

"How about Maloney?"

"Jack beat him up bad. Knocked him out." Doc Smith tilted his jug. "How come you didn't hear about it before now?"

"I was busy making Sonny Wilson a new wagon."

"Hamilton sent Maloney to pick on Jack. They say Maloney tried to drive Jack into a gunfight. Jack took fists, though. I patched up Smoky, then he hightailed for the Circle Bar to tell Big Ed."

"Well, I'll be hanged."

Doc Smith said quietly, "He's crossed Big Ed. Big Ed can't allow that to go by uncalled. I wonder if *he* aims to kill Jack...or hire one of his gunmen to do the chore?"

Ike Jones had a cold feeling in his belly. "Don't talk that way, Doc."

Doc Smith shrugged. "Jack settled on land claimed by Big Ed. He knew what he was getting into. There's an odd look in your eyes, Ike Jones; what're you thinking about?"

"Kerrie Franklin."

Doc Smith spat on the floor. "About six weeks, and she has her first baby... I see what you mean."

"She's too young to be a widder."

"You got some scheme, Ike. Let me in on it?"

Ike Jones got to his feet. "Goo'bye, Doc," he said.

SIX MILES from Twin Butte town to the Franklin farm. Ike Jones rode a swaybacked old mare at a trot.

He remembered the first time he had met Jack Franklin. He had been up at the new depot watching a train come in when Jack had swung down, fresh from cow college.

"I'm going to raise purebred Hereford cows," he told Ike Jones. "I'm looking for a good place to file a homestead on."

"This is all Circle Bar range, youngster. Owned by Big Ed Hamilton. Big Ed is a hard man where a farmer is concerned."

"Does he own a deed to his land?"

"No, he runs on open range—gover'ment land."

"The Law will be on my side."

"Law never yet kept a man from stoppin' a bullet, young man."

Young Jack had looked at the two buttes which had given the town its name. His gaze had roved over the green bottomland with its tall bluejoint grass. "Looks good to me, Mr. Jones.

Will you take me around in your buggy? I'll pay you, of course."

"Be glad to, son. No pay, either. Nothin' much doin' in my carpenter shop right now. Come along to my barn."

For two days he showed Jack Franklin around, and finally Jack decided to settle on Willow Creek. He filed a homestead entry and next spring shipped in fifty head of purebred Hereford cows and two registered Hereford bulls.

The local girls made a play for him, but that same spring he went away for a week, and when he came back he had Kerrie.

"The new Mrs. Franklin, Ike."

Ike could only stare.

She was beautiful. Her dark hair glistened, her eyes sparkled. Suddenly into the memory of old Ike Jones had come the picture of another woman. A woman who had been even more beautiful than Kerrie.

Ike stared at her.

A rider came out of the foothills, heading toward him. Ike pulled in and danger became a hard fist in his belly.

"Where you headin' for, Ike?"

The rider was Smoky, the man Jack had whipped. "This is a free country," Ike Jones reminded.

Jack's knuckles had worked over Smoky rather convincingly, Ike saw. His right eye was getting black. "You ain't headin' out for Jack Franklin's, are you, Ike?"

"My business, Smoky Maloney."

Maloney's voice got hard. "Don't raise your pinfeathers, you ol' rooster. What the hell you hornin' in for? Them Franklin people ain't no kin of yours, are they?"

"That's my business, too."

Maloney grinned. "Ed Hamilton didn't like the way you talked to him, he told me. Hell, he only stopped in to order a coffin, an' looks like you'd be glad to git the job—seein' you're all the time so busted for cash."

"So Big Ed sent you to talk to me, eh?"

Smoky Maloney nodded. "Thet's the deal, carpenter."

Ike Jones had a moment of conflicting doubts. He wasn't a young button any more, and rheumatism had hit him kind of hard: still, he could handle a gun right well. He wasn't much of a menace to Big Ed Hamilton's empire-building plans. Then the real motivation suddenly became clear.

He had a high standing in this pioneer community. Because of his prestige, he might be able to turn public opinion against Big Ed. And what man can fight public opinion?

Ike Jones kept his seamed old face bland and without thoughts as he studied Big Ed Hamilton's gunman. "You're a slimy snake, Smoky!"

Smoky stood on stirrups and looked beyond Ike Jones. He stared at the foothills. "Who the heck is thet comin' this way?"

Ike Jones turned his head; then, he realized he had fallen for an old, old trick. He jerked his head back suddenly. From the corner of his right eye he saw the downward smash of Smoky Maloney's .45.

The gun hit him across the head. He remembered the sickening thud; he remembered starting to slide from his saddle.

Then all memory disappeared.

WHEN HE came to the world revolved madly. The whirling stopped and out of its center came a lovely feminine head. Dark hair. Dark glistening eyes.

"Kerrie, what are you doing here?"

"Oh, Ike! Are you hurt bad?"

Ike Jones sat up and held his head in his hands. Memory flooded him with bitterness. He could even the tables with Smoky Maloney. Yes, and with Big Ed Hamilton, for Smoky had acted on his boss' orders.

They'll pay for this, Ike Jones told Ike Jones.

Ike waited for his reeling brain to settle down and then he lowered his hands and looked at Jack Franklin's wife. "What you doin' out here on open range?"

"Our milk cow drifted away from her pasture. I came out of the hills just as Smoky Maloney slugged you. He told me about his fight with Jack... down in Twin Butte, too."

Ike got to his wobbly feet. "You shouldn't be a-ridin' a hoss, woman, what with your baby not so far away...might hurt you an' the baby both. Smoky shouldn't a-told you about the fight!"

"I'd have found out anyway, even though Jack would have tried to keep it from me. On a range this small you can't hide something like that."

"Ain't good to scare a woman while she's totin' a young one."

"I'm all right."

"Jack left town some time ago. Where is he now?"

"I don't know."

"When did you leave home?"

"About two hours ago. He might be home by now, or he might have come home and has ridden out looking for me."

Ike Jones squinted at a rider approaching on the wagon-trail. "Looks familiar to me," he said.

"That's Doc Smith."

Ike said, "My eyes ain't the world's best no longer, although I sure can spot a purty girl quick." He looked at Kerrie and smiled, and she smiled back. They liked each other very much.

But the other woman—the woman Kerrie so closely resembled—had *loved* Ike Jones. Young Ike Jones, then...

"Howdy, Doc."

DOC SMITH'S jug, tied to his saddle, bounced with each step of his old horse. He had a cigar between his lips but his eyes were inquisitive as he looked at Ike Jones.

"You look pale, Ike. You see a ghost?"

"Yeah," Ike Jones joked. "Name was Smoky Maloney."

"Tell me."

Ike told about his run-in with the Big Ed Hamilton gunman. "He didn't want me to side the Franklins, I reckon."

Doc Smith nodded sagely, cigar moving. "Figured you'd run into a passel of trouble, so I saddled Old Nelly and rode this way. Did you find your milk cow, Kerrie?"

"She's in a coulee over there."

"Let's head for your farm," Ike Jones said.

She took them to where the cow was grazing in the buckrush and then she said, "I'll lope ahead and see if Jack is home and get some vittles to cooking. See you later, men."

She touched her pony with her spurs and he broke into a gallop. Ike Jones watched her leave, and he frowned.

"That lopin' that hoss won't hurt her, will it, Doc?"

"Those foolish ideas went out with the Civil War; she's young and strong as a Hereford heifer."

"I'm worried about Jack."

Doc Smith untied his jug and drank. "Jack isn't on the trail behind us, we know that. Let's hope he isn't lying dead on the trail ahead."

"That Kerrie—she's wonderful."

Doc Smith's watery eyes looked at him sharply. "You really love that little girl, don't you?"

"Like she was the daughter I've always wanted...and never had."

"Let's not get sentimental," Doc Smith said.

Ike thought, *His voice sounded awful gruff.*

Doc Smith asked, "If you were in Big Ed Hamilton's boots what would be the first thing you would do?"

"Shoot myself."

"Be serious."

Ike Jones summed it up with, "Well,

he has to get the Franklins out. One way is to shoot them out of Twin Buttes. He might hold back on that because them two young folks is awful popular in town."

"That's right."

"Then, he'd steal their cattle. With them Herefords lost to them, the Franklins would have to jerk stakes. Big Ed wants their land back as Circle Bar graze. He has to get them out, or other farmers will come and settle."

"Good logic."

They made the cow lope. Her udder was so full that her running made the milk jet out of its own accord. They came to a hill and the trail lay open ahead; nobody was on it. They followed the dirty ribbon of dust to the point where it entered the Franklin homestead.

"I feel better," Doc Smith said. He looked at Ike Jones. "Kerrie sure looks a lot like *our* Sadie."

"*Our* Sadie! I was married to Sadie, not you!"

Doc Smith smiled. "Your neck is getting so rough I'll have to outfit you with a sandpaper collar, Ike. We both corted her. You won, you old galoot. Kerrie is the spitting image of your wife, Ike."

"Maybe that's why I like her so well."

"Yes, it's one reason. The other is that Kerrie is so danged nice to everybody; everybody loves her."

When they rode into the yard, the cow trotting ahead, Kerrie and Jack Franklin came out of the neat little frame house to greet them.

Ike thought, *They're young and in love and want to make a home together for all times. She sure reminds me of Sadie.*

Doc Smith, who had never married, looked at Kerrie and thought, *She sure looks and acts like Sadie.*

Both said, to Jack, "Howdy, young man." Both hid their thoughts.

THEY WERE in the living room. The furniture was old but had been repaired and Kerrie had done a good job redecorating it. "We aren't running," Jack Franklin stated.

"Hamilton ordered a coffin for you," Ike Jones reminded. "He aims to use it, too; he never was one to throw money away. You got a wife an' a baby comin' up, Jack. Remember thet."

Young Jack, anguish in his eyes, looked at his young wife.

Ike saw indecision momentarily flick over Kerrie's face, then this became lost when stubbornness came in. "Jack says we won't run. And what he says stands, friends."

Ike Jones exhaled loudly. "Well, that's settled. First, then, we got to get your purebred Herefords hid somewhere."

"Big Ed Hamilton wants those cows," Doc Smith said.

"Whoa up," Jack Franklin cut in.

All eyes switched to him.

"This is our fight," Jack reminded. "There might be some lead flying. You two have nothing at stake. Much as we appreciate your help—"

"You kinda got the wrong slant," Ike Jones interrupted.

Jack looked at him. "Why say that?"

"You forget that Smoky Maloney slugged me cold. He had no reason to hit me; I wasn't even heading for this spread." Ike lied like an old trouper.

"Where were you going?" Jack's voice sounded suspicious.

"I was ridin' out to the crick to look for a big cottonwood to saw down for lumber. I got a coffin to make, remember?"

"How can I forget?" Jack looked at Doc Smith. "*You're* no carpenter, Doc; you weren't scouting for lumber."

"I was going to the creek to fish."

"You've not got fishing gear on your saddle."

"I got it cached along the creek. That way I don't have to tote it into

town and back each time I go fishing."

"I don't believe you."

Ike said, "Too bad."

Doc Smith smiled. "Sure is."

There was a moment of silence, then Jack Franklin smiled boyishly. "We move the Herefords," he said.

Ike Jones knew of a box canyon back in the badlands; they would hide the cattle there. They were good cattle—wide-backed, lumbering, beef to the hocks. The kind of beef cattle this country needed to lift its herds out of the old Texas longhorn strain which was bony and tall and packed little flesh.

From the ridge Jack Franklin looked back at his house and holdings. "They might try to burn down my outfit."

Doc Smith pulled his .30-30 rifle out of its saddle-holster. "Not with me guarding it," he said and rode down the slope.

Ike glanced at the sun. "We'd better push these critters fast," he said; "Kerrie, girl, be careful your hoss don't fall."

"I'm. . . all right."

Ike gave the orders. "Kerrie, you haze them critters. Jack'll ride right flank; I'll take left. Them buttes up ahead might have a Hamilton man watchin' us through fieldglasses."

Kerrie said, "You be careful, Jack."

Jack kissed her. Ike Jones had a lump in his throat. He remembered Sadie. Sadie had never fussed about her own comforts and health; she had only fussed over a gent named Ike Jones.

Ike rode up the slope.

HE WAS ON a ridge. Along this ridge, coming toward him, rode a man.

Ike pulled in, cocked his old Winchester and waited. The man evidently had not seen him. The cabinet-maker pulled off the trail and hid in a motte of service berry bushes.

The rider was heading toward the Hereford herd.

Because the cattle were in a coulee, he had, so far, not been able to see them. Ike Jones recognized the man as a Hamilton rider. Carrying his rifle, on foot, he went ahead, once sliding in loose gravel, falling to his knees. He gained a high promontory.

The rider now was about an eighth of a mile away, jogging toward him.

Ike grinned, laid his rifle across a sandstone boulder, allowed for the distance and the wind-drift. He squeezed the trigger, the hammer fell, the Winchester jumped back.

He had fired just ahead of the rider. Now the man jerked his mount to a sliding halt. Another bullet slapped off a rock to his right.

The Hamilton rider whirled his horse.

Ike shot again, and deliberately missed.

The man whipped his bronc for speed. Ike sprinkled bullets around him. Then the horse and rider dipped into a coulee and the next time Ike saw the man he was out on the flat, still riding like the devil was branding him with a red-hot iron.

Ike had his first real laugh in months.

The Hamilton man would never know who had shot at him, or why the hidden rifleman had surrounded him with bullets. . .

They saw no more riders. They got the cattle penned in the canyon. The fat Herefords were tired and there was water here in a spring, and some grass.

Ike said, "They'll never find these cattle here."

"They never will," Jack Franklin agreed, looking at his wife, "Kerrie, we got to split up; you stay with the herd, please."

"I want to go with you."

"Please, Kerrie."

"All. . . right, but be careful."

Ike and Jack turned their horses.

From a high ridge, Ike glanced back; he saw the slim girl standing there, watching them. She lifted her hand in what seemed a goodby that held loneliness.

Again, Ike thought of Sadie.

They hit a lope. Jack hollered, "Did I hear some shootin' from your side of the canyon a while back, Ike?"

"Your ears must be bad, son; no shootin'."

Jack said nothing. He rode on high stirrups with his hands braced on the fork of his saddle. Ike Jones' old nag, tired to the marrow, loped a pace behind. They reached the Franklin farm by deep dusk.

Jack pulled in with, "Where is Doc? I figured he'd leg it out to meet us—"

"Over there by the barn— A man lyin' down—"

"That's Doc."

The third bucket of cold well-water brought the medico around. He sat up and stared around him; sanity entered his eyes. "What the hell happened to me?"

Ike said, "We found you flopped out by the barn. This cardboard message was lyin' on your chest."

"What does it say?"

"You read it," Ike said.

"My eyes—they ain't so good any more," Doc Smith said, shaking his head. "My brains rattle. . ."

Old Ike Jones didn't want to admit his eyesight was bad. "You read it for him, Jack."

Jack read:

WARNING!
NESTER, MAKE TRACKS!
PRONTO!
Ed Hamilton

DOC GOT slowly upright. "Heard a noise in the barn. Stuck my head in to look around. . .and the haymow fell in on me. There are some headache powders in my bag, Jack."

"Where is your bag?"

"Tied to my saddle."

Jack returned with the bag. Doc put the powder in a cup and pumped water over it and stirred it with his forefinger before handing it to Ike Jones.

"Drink it, Ike."

"But I thought—"

Doc chuckled and uncorked his jug. "Whiskey is a man's drink." He made loud noises.

Ike grinned and drank the liquid. It tasted rough but it did make his own head feel better.

Doc Smith lowered his jug. "Hamilton has hit the end of his rope. He has to make good his boast or leave the country. He'll hit at this spread again, and do it pronto; that's my idea."

Ike Jones and Jack agreed.

Jack said, "We got to stake ourselves out and be ready."

They decided Jack would hide in the brush along the creek. Doc would climb up on the windmill and lie flat on the wooden platform. Ike would climb onto the barn with his rifle.

Jack said, "Be careful, you two."

He went into the brush.

Ike looked at Doc Smith. "Hell of a guard you turned out to be, Doc. You know, we're both over the average lifetime span."

"I know that. I feel it, too."

Ike said slowly, "Kerrie sure loves that boy."

"They've got a good and long and useful life ahead of them together," Doc said.

"What if he got kilt?" Ike asked.

Doc said, "Can you hit a man just

hard enough to knock him out? They tell me it requires just the right touch."

"I can. . . try."

"Then try," Doc Smith said.

"Cut me a young an' flexible hunk of diamond willer," Ike said.

Within ten minutes, hands and feet tied, Jack Franklin slept in the root-cellar, with one of Ike Jones' dirty socks gagging him. Doc Smith laboriously climbed the windmill ladder and Ike Jones laboriously got on top of the barn, kicking the ladder down behind him.

And Big Ed Hamilton hit within an hour.

Ike Jones trembled with fear. He decided that life was sweet to a man regardless of his age. Doc Smith had also reached this decision. To heck with the average life-span!

Then, Ike spotted the first raider. He came out of the brush hesitantly, then stood in the clearing and gave the farmstead a long and ardent perusal. Moonlight showed him clearly; Ike did not know him.

Ike wanted to call a warning to Doc Smith. But, if he called, the trap would be sprung too soon, so he remained silent.

Now two others moved out of the brush. Ike recognized one as Smoky Maloney. The other, he saw, was Big Ed Hamilton.

Maloney carried a five-gallon can.

Kerosene. . .

Ike waited until the three were in the clearing between the barn and the windmill. He straightened, pistol ready. His voice was a savage croaking sound. "That's far enough, Big Ed!"

THE TRIO below him froze. Gaunt, immobile shadows, there under the yellow impersonal moon.

Big Ed Hamilton asked, "Who talks. . . and where?"

"Ike Jones. Up here on the barn."

"And Doc Smith, too," the medico horned in roughly. "Up here, on the windmill platform."

Big Ed looked at Ike Jones. He turned and looked up at Doc Smith. "The two old fossils," he said. "Smoky, you take the doc; I'll tend to ol' Ike Jones!"

Ike hollered, "I made a coffin for *you,* Big Ed; not for Jack Franklin. You make a move to shoot at me an' into that pine box you go!"

"I'll call that," Big Ed hollered.

Big Ed toted a Winchester. The rifle was slower to get into action than would have been a six-shooter; this was one point in old Ike Jones' favor.

Afterwards, Ike remembered his old .45 roaring and bucking. He remembered fanning the hammer. He remembered rifle balls tearing the roof under his boots.

Then, Ed Hamilton was down. Maloney, who had been shooting at Doc, broke into a run. Doc's bullet knocked him spinning, but he got to the safety of the brush. The third man never got into the battle. He was already in the brush; he hit for the timber like a cottontail chased by a bobcat.

The roar died, and wind took away powdersmoke.

Ike said, "Maloney never got on his hoss."

"Only one rode out," Doc said. "Did you get hit?"

"No. How about you?"

"Bullet grooved a hunk of meat out of my right forearm."

"Break the bone?"

"No."

Doc started climbing down the ladder. Ike Jones wished now he hadn't kicked the ladder down. It was at least eight feet from the roof to the ground. He had not wanted the ladder leaning against the barn because he had figured maybe Big Ed would have got suspicious that somebody was hiding on the roof.

Gotta jump, he told himself. *Hard on the old bones, too.*

He jumped. He almost unhinged both knees, but he lived through it.

[*Turn To Page* 59]

Could this oldster really be Ganse, who was supposed to have been killed by Indians, years ago?

MADMAN'S TRAIL

by Gordon D. Shirreffs

LEE MILLS reached for the coffee pot resting among the coals of his fire and stopped to look back over his shoulder. The wind searched through the dark canyon, moaning among the scrub oaks and junipers, flapping his tent, and sending a chill down his back. Lee stood up and glanced at his Winchester leaning against his blanket roll. For a moment he stood there, a lean lath of a man, and then he spoke to himself. "You damned jackass. You've been in these blasted mountains too long by yourself. You're hearing things again."

He sat down and reached for the coffee pot again, only to draw his hand back quickly and slap it down on his Colt. A rising had come in the wind, bringing with it a low moaning that seemed almost human. Lee faded back toward his tent and picked up his Winchester, levering home a .44. He listened intently. Somewhere up the canyon, a twig snapped. Lee stepped behind a tree. There were still broncho

Apaches in that country, predatory Tontos who had never settled down at San Carlos.

Lee's roan whinnied plaintively. "Shut up, Nelly," he said out of the corner of his mouth.

Feet grated on the hard earth beyond the rim of firelight. Lee felt cold sweat trickle down his sides. He had heard many wild and eerie tales about the Mogollon country. Suddenly, he jerked. Where before there had been only brush and trees, there was now a dim figure standing just beyond the flickering firelight. It seemed as though it had materialized from thin air. There was a low rumble of thunder high in the mountains and forked lightning lanced into a jagged peak, lighting the canyon. Lee stared at the figure lit by the eerie light. A bearded man, ragged and unkempt, reaching out with skinny clawed hands as though wanting to warm himself at the fire but afraid to risk it. Lee stepped out from behind the tree. "What do you want, stranger?" he asked.

The man turned and plunged into the brush. Lee raced after him. The man had vanished. Lee stopped running. *Was it a ghost?* The phantom of one of those lonely wanderers whose bones he had found scattered by wolves and coyotes in almost inaccessible canyons?

There was a sudden movement behind him. He was hit hard. The stench of sour, sweat-soaked clothing flooded his nostrils. He dropped the saddle gun from the fury of the attack, and went down on one knee. Nails raked across his face. He threw himself sideways. A horny foot sank into his lean gut, driving the wind from him. He gripped a skinny ankle as he went down and jerked it toward him. The man went down, cracking his head hard on the earth. He lay still.

Lee got to his feet, struggling to breathe. He drew his Colt. The man was breathing harshly. Lee picked him up; he was as light as Lee's blanket roll. He carried him toward the fire and dumped him down. He lashed his hands behind him with a piece of picket line and filled his coffee cup. He studied the unconscious man. He was a wild one. His hair and beard grew together and his feet were scarred and calloused as though he had been without foot-gear for a long time in that thorny country. His sides, beneath his tattered shirt, looked like a washboard.

THE STRANGER stirred and opened his eyes. He looked at Lee. "Who are you?" he asked.

"Lee Mills."

"What are you doing here?"

Lee grinned. "Maybe *you'd* better answer that one first. *I'm* a prospector."

The man moved his hands. "What'd I do?"

"Came to my fire. Ran away. I followed you and you jumped me. I had to lay you out, stranger."

The man shook his head. "I didn't mean to make trouble. You *sure* I jumped you?"

"Anyone else around here? Far's I know, there isn't anyone, excepting broncho Apaches within thirty miles of here."

"Yes," the stranger said quietly, "Apaches. Tontos. I guess I shook them off." He glanced quickly at Lee. "What month is this?"

"October."

"October? What year?"

Lee shifted a little, glancing at his rifle. The man was cracked from whiffle-tree to rear axle.

"I asked you: *what year?*" There was a low intensity in his tone.

" '81," said Lee.

"For God's sake! You sure?"

"Certainly! Why?"

The stranger raised his head as thunder beat wild drums in the mountains. *"Why?* The last thing I remember is the year 1879; month of December."

Lee felt a chill raise the skin on his body. "You're joshing," he said.

The man shook his head. "My name is Ganse Hendricks. I left Globe in October of '79; two years ago."

"Ganse Hendricks! He's dead!"

Hendricks looked down at his left forearm. "Read," he said.

Lee looked closely at the dirty arm. It was tattooed. "Ganse Hendricks," he read. "A wandering fool. Denver, 1865." He looked up at the old man. "I reckon you're not lying," he said, "but old Ganse vanished two years ago. They say he was looking for Sno-ta-hay, the lost Adams Diggin's, and the Tontos got him."

Hendricks jerked his hands. "Cut me loose, Mills; I'm harmless. I thought you were a Tonto."

Lee took out his clasp knife and cut Hendricks loose. He filled a cup with coffee. "You hungry, Ganse?" he asked as he handed the cup to the old man.

Ganse gripped the cup. His hands shook as he drank. "Yeh! Hungry as sin."

Lee filled the spider with bacon and shoved an earthenware pot of beans into the coals. "Hog jowls and Mexican strawberries," he said. "I ate the last of my sourdough bread two hours ago."

Ganse refilled his cup. "You got any weed?" he asked.

Ganse rolled two cigarets and thrust one in Ganse's mouth. He lit them with a lucifer. The old man drew the smoke in deeply. "Before God," he said, "I would have traded my soul for a smoke many a time." Lee filled a plate for the old man and watched him eat. "Like food for the Gods," said Ganse as he finished.

"You'd better get some sleep," said Lee.

Ganse shook his head. "I haven't talked to a white man in two years. Couldn't sleep now. You sleepy?"

Lee grinned. "Not with *you* around. What's the story, Ganse?" He got up and got a blanket for Ganse.

The old man draped it about his skinny shoulders. He leaned back against a rock. "You ever hear of Vasquez?" he asked.

"Yes. Came through the Gila country a couple of hundred years ago. Disappeared in the Gila mountain country. Spaniard he was. A conquistadore, I guess."

Ganse spat. "Gila country, hell!"

"Every damned story teller in this country knows he was in the Gila country."

"They lie!"

"Take it easy, Ganse. I thought you had been looking for Sno-ta-hay."

"Sno-ta-hay?" Ganse snorted. "Apaches won't let a white-eye within twenty miles of Sno-ta-hay."

"They let Adams and his party in there in '64."

"Yeh. But no one else. Besides, what happened to Adams?"

"He's still looking for Sno-ta-hay."

"Yeh, and he always will. Him and everyone else crazy enough to buck up against the Apaches."

Lee rolled two more cigarets. "What *were* you looking for?"

Ganse looked shrewdly at Lee. "I like you, son. You've been nice to me. Saved my life, I guess. I'll tell you; I never bothered with Sno-ta-hay; spent my time following Vasquez' trail. Took me three years to track the old villain down. Vasquez turned off from the Gila near what is now Globe. I figure he knew there was silver around there, but he didn't want silver."

"No? Why not?"

Ganse waved a skinny claw. "Vasquez was a lieutenant under Cordoba. Cordoba had found gold in the Superstitions. Vasquez was put in charge of the mule train that was *supposed* to take the gold south into Sonora. He sent some of the mules, sure, but they didn't have no gold on them. They were loaded with rocks. Vasquez took the gold and a few men and came north, leaving traces of travel toward the

Gilas. Vasquez meant to set up a kingdom somewhere up here, away from the vengeance of Cordoba and the King of Spain. Cordoba followed him and was killed by Tontos. Vasquez vanished in here somewhere."

"Where'd you learn all this?"

"I looked through old mission records in Mexico; talked to the padres down there. Poked about on every trace of Vasquez I could find. Twenty miles from here I knew I was on the right track."

GANSE looked back over his shoulder as though someone might be listening and then leaned forward, tapping Lee on the knee with a bony finger. "I found three skeletons and Spanish half-armor in a box canyon. I figure Vasquez got rid of his three men and then went on alone, maybe with another man or two, and an Indian guide. I studied the lie of the land and figured out the *only* way he could get north through the mountains. I kept on. Five miles from here, I knew I was on his trail. I found a rock hut, half-buried in a rock fall. I dug it out at night, hiding out in the daytime because of the bronchos, and found a map on deerskin, showing Vasquez' trail. I tracked the old thief down. Landed in the damndest canyon you ever saw, big as sin, and wild as Tombstone on pay night. By God, Lee, I lived from second to second. Those Tontos were all around me. I was running from them one day, although they hadn't *seen* me. Fell off a damned cliff and woke up not knowing who I was. My head was damned near cracked in half.

"The Tontos found me. Took me in. Mind-gone-far, they said about me. I was safe. They will not touch one whose mind is not well. There were times when I seemed myself and was afraid, and then there were other times when I remembered nothing. One day I found a place where I was sure Vasquez had been. I was careful, going there again at night, but I was seen. The Tontos knew then what I was after. They chased me. My mind went blank again. The next thing I knew I awoke here, beside your fire, and am myself again."

Lee stirred the fire. "So?"

Ganse wiped his mouth. "I'll swear Vasquez' gold is in that Tonto canyon. I was so damned close!"

"You'd better leave it alone."

"What? There's a fortune in there, Mills."

"You'll lose your life if you go back in there."

Ganse snorted. "You're a fool! There's enough gold in there for both of us. We can be rich, man. Listen: you grubstake us. I'll show you the way. We'll split. What do you say?"

Lee stood up. "I say we'd better put out this fire and move the camp. You'd better get some sleep. I'm packing out of here tomorrow, and if you've got any damned sense left, you'll go with me."

Lee awoke at dawn. He hadn't slept well. The old man's story kept running through his mind. Five years of prospecting hadn't done him much good. A few *chispas;* a small strike in the Harcuvars. He stepped out of the tent and parted the brush he had piled in front of it. The sky was gray. There would be rain before nightfall and a flashstorm might fill those damned twisted canyons like a trough. He looked up at the canyon walls. Driftwood and dried brush hung high overhead in crevices.

Lee shuddered. The water would come through there like a mill race. He looked to the north, toward the somber, looming heights. Vasquez. A legend of the Southwest. What if the old man *had* found him? Lee had slipped around the Apaches before. He had shot it out with two of them once in the Mazatzals and sent them to the House Of Spirits.

Ganse stirred. He coughed. "Well?" he asked quietly, "you throwing in with old Ganse?"

Lee pulled at his lower lip. "I'm not

anxious to be gutted by a Tonto knife, Ganse."

Ganse spat. "You want to wander through these damned mountains for the rest of your life? They'll find your bones years from now and shake their heads saying that you were a damned fool. Come on! Plunge! Grab the bull by the horns! We'll be rich, I tell you. Come along with old Ganse." He got up and yawned. "We can ride around in carriages, smoking stogies and playing high, low and jack with the hurdy-gurdy girls."

Lee grinned. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself at your age."

Ganse waved a hand. "Oh, all right. But I'll live like a king, I tell you." Ganse padded past Lee, turned and waved a hand and started down the slope.

"Wait!" called Lee. "You aren't going in *there* alone?"

Ganse turned. "I'm not taking a troop of cavalry with me, sonny."

Lee spat angrily. "All right! All right! Damn you! I'll go."

LATER Lee loaded his double-barreled Greener with buck-and-ball and handed it to Ganse. "You might need this." He checked his Winchester and Colt and led his mare after the old man. A cold wind chilled him. He shivered. It was more than the searching wind that chilled him.

It was late afternoon when Ganse held out a restraining hand toward Lee. "Leave the cayuse," he whispered. "Follow me."

Lee scrambled up the slope and dropped beside Ganse where he lay looking down into a large canyon.

Eroded walls looked as though an echoing shout would bring them down in crashing destruction. Scrub oak, juniper and manzanita matted the slopes. A hawk circled lazily on an updraft. There was a glint of water in a rock pan far below.

Ganse gripped Lee by the neck with surprising strength. "Look!" he said fiercely. "You see that talus slope? See that dark patch of rock? Behind that is a cave, opening into a sort of natural shaft. There's water in there. That's Vasquez' cave."

Lee felt his hands go sweat greasy on the stock of his rifle. He shook his head. It still seemed like a dream. "So?" he asked.

"We leave your cayuse here and go in afoot. We can get across here tonight. The Tontos don't like this place at night. Too many owls hooting omens at them."

They crossed the rugged floor of the canyon in a pitchy blackness that made it almost impossible for Lee to distinguish anything. The old man walked like a cat, bringing to life an almost overwhelming fear, that would have made Lee run like a panicky deer back the way he had come. The strange old man moved as though in a dream. The whole damned thing was a dream. Lee was sure he would wake up. He was broken from the spell by Ganse. "Up the slope. For Christ's sake, don't make a noise!"

"You said there were no Tontos in here."

"There aren't; but they can hear like a dog. One slip; one tumbled rock, and they'll be in here at dawn, snuffling the ground until they root us out and turn us over to the squaws."

Lee followed the old man, holding a hand outthrust in front of him as though he would meet an invisible wall in the pitchy night. The cold sweat soaked his clothing and chilled him.

He was ready to turn and run hell-for-leather when Ganse stopped and held his head close to Lee's. "We're here."

He padded ahead, rounding a humped rock and then he was gone. Lee walked slowly after him, barely able to distinguish the rock wall towering above him. A cool wind dried the sweat on his face. Ganse gripped him by the hand and went on into a darkness that was deeper than that in the valley, but

Lee seemed to feel the living rock about him. Then his straining eyes seemed to see a lighter place.

Ganse stopped. Lee looked up. High overhead was a patch lighter. It was the sky. Ganse fumbled about and then scratched a lucifer. Lee crushed it out, burning his hand. "You damned ass," he said hoarsely. "You want them Tontos on our necks?"

"They can't see in here."

Still, Lee tensed with excitement as Ganse lit another match and ignited a candle stub. He thrust it out. In the flickering yellow light, Lee saw a pile of metal. Beyond it was something white. Ganse knelt beside the metal. The candlelight showed a morion helmet with its deeply curved rim and high crown. There was a heavy cuirass there, engraved in Latin. The light glinted on the haft of a heavy sword. It was set with precious stones. Lee looked past the old Spanish armor and shuddered a little as he stared into the sightless sockets of a human skull. Ganse rooted behind some rocks and chuckled. He lifted a heavy hide sack. The bottom ripped and golden metal thudded on the rocks. Lee felt his gut flip over. "Gold!" he said.

Ganse leaned close to Lee. "Was I lying? Am I crazy? There are four *aparejos* here, filled with the stuff. We're rich! *Mister* Mills and *Mister* Hendricks, from now on. How does it feel to be a damned Midas, sonny?"

Lee knelt by the pile of ignots, shoving back the bones of Vasquez. He hefted two of them and looked up at Ganse. "By God, you weren't lying, Ganse." Lee picked up an ancient coin and thrust it in his shirt pocket.

Ganse grinned. "Let's get to packing. We can get two sacks out now and the other two before dawn. No time to waste, Lee."

Ganse lifted a sack and staggered a little with its weight. He heaved it up on his gaunt shoulder. "Come on," he said and hurried into the cave.

Lee crouched beside the rock pan in the hollow to drink. There was an uneasiness about the place. He lifted the *aparejo* and shrugged it across his shoulders, wondering how the emaciated old man could have handled one so easily. He felt his way through the cave and down the slope. There was no sign of the old man. Lee went forward a hundred yards and was hopelessly lost. He placed the *aparejo* and his rifle on the ground and looked about. The darkness was graying a little and with a start, he realized it must be the false dawn. He lifted the *aparejo* and worked his way back to the slope and up to the cave, panting with the exertion. He began to curse Ganse for his damned haste.

He went back into the cave and dropped the sack and then remembered he had left his Winchester lying on the canyon floor. He went back to the mouth of the cave and stopped. He could distinguish the canyon floor now, it was that light. He crouched behind a rock and waited, hungry for a smoke. The eastern sky was faintly tinted with rose and gold when he saw the movement up the canyon. A lithe figure was trotting toward the cave. Lee cursed. An Apache. He dropped behind the rock and peered around it. A long line of Apaches were casting about in the canyon. They were looking for something. It was then he saw Ganse. The old man was bounding through the rocks farther to the west like a frightened buck. A high-pitched whoop drifted to Lee and he knew they had seen old Ganse. It was followed by the double roar of the Greener. He lowered his head and almost retched. The old man had been so damned close to his dream.

THE OLD man's screams carried clearly to Lee in the cave. It had been going on for hours as the sun rose and filled the canyon with light. Suddenly the screams stopped. Lee raised his head and listened. The old man was dead then. Lee felt for his Colt. He had six shots ready for a

rush, and a full belt of cartridges. He could hold out for a long time before he might have to use one on himself. His hand struck his holster. Sweat poured out of him. The sixgun was gone. He ran to the mouth of the cave and then stopped.

The Tontos were sitting about the mutilated body of old Ganse, not two hundred yards down the slope. Smoke wavered upward from the fire which had served to speed Ganse to his horrible death. Ollas passed from hand to hand among the Tontos as they drank steadily, sated with torturing the old man. The wind picked up the odor of *tiswin,* the Apache hell brew, and carried it to Lee. He went back into the cave and retched violently.

The long hours drifted past. Now and then the low mutter of thunder echoed in the canyon. Hunger gnawed at Lee. The Tontos had been chanting for a long time. Lee looked at the white bones of the Spaniard; his own skeleton might soon be mingled with them. He went to the mouth of the cave. It was about half an hour before dusk. Two Apaches were lifting the *aparejo* the old man had dropped in his wild flight. They started up the slope toward the cave. Lee ran back to the hollow. Ganse's words came back to him. *"The Tontos don't like this place at night. Too many owls hooting omens at them."*

He hung the cuirass of the Spaniard across his chest and placed the morion on his head. He picked up the heavy sword and hefted it, then he went back to the cave mouth, arriving just as the two Apaches, staggering drunkenly, lowered the heavy *aparejo* for a rest, not fifty feet from the cave mouth.

Lee swallowed dryly and then hooted softly. Two heads raised quickly. He hooted again, louder this time. He could see the whites of their eyes in the gathering darkness. They began to back down the slope toward the other Tontos. Lee moved to one side and the heavy morion helmet fell from his head and clattered on the rock, raising a din. The Tontos stood up about their fire. Lee put the helmet on. His hands shook like he had the ague. He stepped out of the cave and waved the sword ominously at them. Some of them began to back toward the canyon mouth. A thick-bodied brave, wearing Ganse's red undershirt, raised a carbine. Lee began to walk down the slope. Thunder rolled. Forked lightning traced a vivid pattern across the darkening sky. Lee kept on his ponderous way. Most of the Tontos shrank back, but the red-shirted brave stood his ground; a gutty man, defying the ancient superstitions of his people.

Lee kept on. He could see Ganse's broken body now, cast aside like a bundle of useless clothing. The Tonto fired. The slug richochetted from the rocks behind Lee. He plunged down the slope, swinging the heavy blade. It sank deep into the neck of the Tonto, half-severing his head. Some of the Tontos began to run. There was a flash of lightning.

Lee moaned hollowly. His foot slipped on a smooth stone and he went down on one knee. The helmet clattered down the slope. A tall Apache stared at Lee and whipped out a pistol from his breech clout. He fired. The slug dented the side of cuirass with a hammer blow, spinning Lee about. There was a loud crash of thunder and suddenly rain began to fall. To the west, veils of rain were lit by the flickering lightning. The pistol roared again. Lee closed the gap, thrusting with the long blade. The Apache leaped aside and tried to force back the hammer of his pistol. Lee sank the blade into the Tonto's thick chest and darted into a clump of brush. The dying Tonto called out, "Brothers! He is but a man!" His call was followed by whoops from the Tontos.

Lee cast the cuirass aside and ran for the far side of the canyon. The rain pelted down, soaking his shirt. His breath came harshly as he scrambled

across a rock ledge. He looked back. The Tontos were running toward him in a crescent, and the horns would soon cut in on him, ringing him with warriors. He forced on. The rain was sheeting down now. Rivulets ran across his path. He plunged into what had been a dry wash. There was two inches of muddy water in it now. He splashed across and clambered up the far bank. The Tontos plunged into the wash. There was a dull roaring noise from up the canyon. Lee crashed through a clump of jumping cholla, cursing hysterically as the needles ripped at his flesh. A Tonto closed in on him, reaching for Lee with fanged knife.

Lee slashed with the sword, received a cut across the chest with the Apache's knife, and then crashed the blade down on the warrior's head, driving him to his knees. Blood ran hot down Lee's chest as he scrambled up the slope toward the canyon wall. He drove himself on with fear as the goad. A heel broke from his left boot. He gashed his knee on a rock. His chest rose and fell like a steam pump. Shots rang out behind him. He fell and could not get up.

The rain smashed down, blinding Lee. He lay still, gripping the sword. The roaring noise became louder. The cries of the Tontos died away. Water swirled about Lee's feet. He pulled himself up as water lapped to his knees. In the lightning-lit canyon, he saw a terrifying sight. The canyon was running with silted water, tossing and churning as it carried trees, brush and rocks in its watery grip! *Flash flood!* He dropped the sword and began to climb. The water rose behind him with incredible swiftness. He pulled himself up a ledge. He looked back. The water had reached the level of the cave on the far side, and even as he watched, it poured into the entrance.

The last thing Lee remembered, was pulling himself up over a ledge with the water racing by a few feet below. He could go no farther. He tumbled over the canyon brim and collapsed.

THE WIND searched coldly through Lee's wet clothing. He opened his eyes. A watery sun peered down on him through thick drifting clouds. He raised his head as he heard a horse nicker plaintively. It was Nelly, Lee's roan. He staggered to her and swung up into his saddle. Time and time again he passed out, clinging to the saddlehorn, as the roan picked her way through cold canyons where the wind moaned eerily. Nelly stopped at Lee's last camp and he crawled into his small tent and passed out again.

It was late afternoon when Lee awoke and watched the dying sun trace faint patterns on the stained canvas over his head. The whole thing had been a nightmare. He wasn't sure of anything. He touched the cuts and bruises that covered his aching body. Old Ganse and his treasure cave *had* been a nightmare. He was sure of that. His fingers touched something in his shirt pocket. He took it out. It was a coin of Spanish origin, vintage of hundreds of treasure canyon. Vasquez *did* exist. He *had* gone with old Ganse. He rubbed his head. He must go back to the canyon. The flash flood would have changed the whole look of the canyon now. Perhaps the cave was buried under tons of silt and fallen rock. The Tontos might have been drowned; yet, they might still be alive, guarding the haunted canyon. It was foolish to go back. Lee lay back and closed his eyes. It was no use. He *had* to go back. He was committed to a madman's trail as surely as old Ganse had been.

★

In Our Next Issue **DIGGER JOHN'S SKI RACE**
by A. A. Baker

THE RUSTY GUN (continued from page 50)

Doc was already kneeling beside Big Ed.

"This gent is dead, Ike."

"Sorry he made me kill him," Ike said. "I never killed a man before; hate to have it on my conscience."

"Forget it," Doc said, gruffly. "He'd have killed you, remember?"

They found Maloney dead in the brush.

"Hamilton has no heirs that I know of," Doc said. "The county'll take over here and— A rider is comin'."

Soon Kerrie rode into the clearing. She stared down at Big Ed Hamilton's body, face pale.

"They come a-raidin'," Ike Jones explained. "You promised you'd stay an' nursemaid them Herefords."

"I had to come. Where—where is Jack?"

"Root-cellar," Ike said.

She dismounted and ran toward the root-cellar. Ike grabbed Doc's arm. "When Jack comes out of there he might want to fight; we better hurry to town an' report this to the sheriff."

They ran for their broncs.

★

KNOW YOUR WEST

Answers To The Puzzle

1. creasing
2. cinch
3. nester
4. Maverick
5. aparejo
6. tailing
7. feeders
8. caavy

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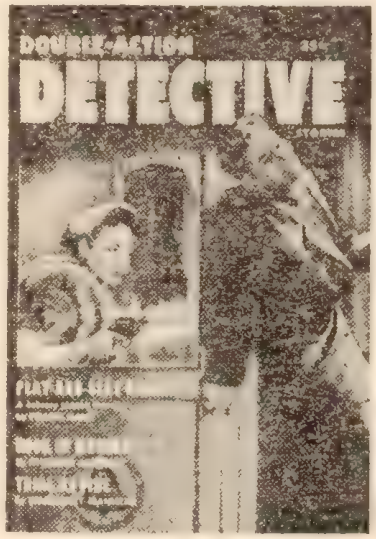

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These, and others, are in

DOUBLE ACTION DETECTIVE Stories

Ride With The Night

(*continued from page 25*)

ther force the Southern Mails to take him in or go bust."

I tried to take that like an old-time stageman, like Redwick would probably have taken it. "Oh hell!" I said, with sufficient disgust.

All three riders laughed at my supposed loyalty to the older road. The foremost rider lifted his palm. "Well, so-long. Thanks, pardner!"

They rode away to bisect the southern trail leaving me to fight down my own hammering pulses. It was just such a thing that I had expected of Laughlin. It was a scheme that would inflame his mind with ideas of empire building and sudden wealth. A new stage and freight road into a promising silver camp—and perhaps the opportunity of bringing an older line begging to him.... But the way fate played him into my hands! If I rode east I was bound to reach him in Mesilla, or perhaps we'd meet along the stretch of the old mail trail.

My boot struck the bay's stirrup and I was riding the night, but not following the blind trail I had known for a year. This time the stars had lightened, the night had suddenly cleared. Somewhere beyond in the vague tomorrows I would find another woman to arouse in me the thoughts Martha had stirred. It would be a long, hard ride until I located Laughlin; harder, perhaps, to crack the truth out of his lying soul. But I would succeed. Of that I had no doubts.

Martha had taught me what it was like to know desire, to want a full life, and to think and plan like a man.

★

Gunplay At Ghost Ranch

(*continued from page 42*)

light that shone through the small window. Art heard Ben curse, snapped a shot off at the foreman, and rolled savagely to one side.

Again, silence reigned.

Cat-wary, Art felt the damp floor found a stone, and threw it a few feet away from him. It landed on another stone, and Ben's gun roared. In the light of the shot, Art saw Ben's viciously curled mouth, and the youth fired four shots at Ben, aiming in a box pattern. He didn't have to look to see that his shots had been effective. No matter how Ben might have dodged. he was bound to have been hit by one of the bullets.

It was nearly two hours later when Art rode into town, leading a horse upon which Ben's body was lashed. Art dismounted in front of Sheriff Taylor's office, tied his horse at the hitch-rail, and turned to the lawman. "Ben killed my father, Sheriff."

The lawman thumbed his Stetson back on his head, tugged at his lower lip. "Old Matt would've been proud of you, Art."

The watery feeling in Art's knees now seemed to race up his legs, into the pit of his stomach. A pale green coloring shaded his face, and hand clasped tightly to his mouth, Art made for the side street.

The sheriff smiled faintly, turned back to his office. He pulled the worn chair out from behind his desk, sat down heavily, and nodded. Old Matt would have been *very* proud of his son.

★

"Colin Hays killed two of my friends, and the Captain told me to get him. He didn't say anything about not crossing rivers. There's no name printed on this stream. I don't know what river it is, and I don't want to be told!"

Novelet of Sinister Intrigue

SATAN'S BACK YARD

by E. E. Clement

A KILLING in the *Red Ace* was no great event. It was the leading and largest gambling resort in the ancient City of Missions. Within its thick 'dobe walls every game of chance known to its age was played. Killings were frequent; men fought over cards; enemy desperadoes met and shot it out, careless of where their bullets struck. Texas rangers, apparently nonchalant but ever watchful, rubbed elbows with the criminal world, seeking wanted men. They often found them in the *Red Ace*.

Sometimes they took them alive. Again, they would shoot it out, and when the smoke cleared away, one or more names would be scratched from the wanted list. Or from the list of rangers....

In this colorful atmosphere, on a certain night, six men were playing poker at a table near the center of the great room. Only two of these were noteworthy. One was Zeb Platte, a professional gambler; the other called himself Colin Hays.

Platte had been in San Antonio five years. No one had asked where he came from, but everybody who knew him liked him. A quiet, handsome, dignified man of forty or so, who talked little, and whose word was always good, Zeb Platte played the game bravely.

Directly across the table from Platte sat Colin Hays. Dark, swarthy, strikingly handsome, near six foot and rather slender. He lost thousands with a laugh, and won other thousands without even a smile. One thing only marred Colin Hays, and that was noticed only by men who were students of character on the far-flung frontiers of the world. Far back in his clear, brown eyes, there

glittered the cold ghost-lights that indicated a killer.

Men in the know of such things wondered about Hays. Was he merely spending his time in San Antonio for pleasure? Not likely. With as much money as he appeared to have, and with his commanding presence, he could go to real cities, to the greatest in the world, and play the game. More likely, he was there looking for someone.

The turbulent old gambling room was unusually quiet. At the poker table only the click of chips and the riffle of cards, with an occasional low-spoken word, was heard. There was much money on the table, chiefly gold pieces. Most of it was in front of Zeb Platte, who was a canny player.

If Platte saw the ghost-lights flashing in Hays' eyes, he gave no note of it. Platte had been out of town for weeks, and this was the first time he had seen Hays. The young fellow had money, and all of Zeb Platte's mind just then was on the business of winning it.

Two young men entered the place together. To the casual observer, they were cowboys from a neighboring ranch, who had come in to look the place over and perhaps place a few bets for pastime. To the wise ones, they were clad a bit too soberly for ranchhands, and their bearing was a bit too assured.

Colin Hays saw them, and the ghost-lights in his eyes flared brighter. They were strangers to him, but he knew them for what they were. They represented law, and Hays was wanted in more than one country.

The two rangers stopped at the monte table. One of them was facing the game, with his back to the poker set. The other eyed the poker table, his glance resting on Hays for a moment.

A squabble rose at the monte layout. The ranger turned, and the backs of both the rangers were toward the poker players. Hays dropped his hands below the table. When they came up there was a gun in each.

He fired three shots. The first bullet passed through Zeb Platte's head. The other two went into the backs of the two rangers.

It had happened almost in the tick of a clock. Hays sped for the open door. By the time he reached it, the other four men at the table were pouring lead after him. There had been but one cry. "He's killed Zeb Platte!"

No thought was taken of the two murdered rangers. No man in that desperate mob cared a damn how many rangers were killed. But Zeb Platte—the square gambler, whose hand was always open to the needy and who had never accumulated considerable money, because he gave it away—was another matter.

Out into the street they poured.

A horse clattered through the narrow street by San Fernando Cathedral in a storm of bullets. A few mounted and followed in pursuit, but the killer had made good his escape. They lost track of him in the darkness toward the river and returned. Nothing had been gained, except that the fugitive seemed to be going south.

CAPTAIN ROGER HOOD, Company M, Frontier Battalion, sat in his quarters in the old Governor's Palace to the west of the *Red Ace*. He heard the shots plainly enough, but shots in San Antonio were no novelty. If there had been trouble, let the police and county officers take care of it. They were jealous of the rangers, and his policy was to wait until he was called upon.

Just then, Captain Hood had other troubles. Victorio, the old Apache chief, was raiding the country to the northwest of San Antonio, and white desperadoes were taking advantage of the opportunity to commit all sorts of crimes and charge them to the Indians. Captain Hood had been ordered to recruit his company to its full strength

and repair to the scene of warfare.

The recruiting had been done, and the company was to move at daybreak. Half of his men were new to the service. Good men. Men who would make good rangers, but inexperienced. There was little discipline in Company M. It was not a military, but a police force—a mounted constabulary. The men were quartered about over the old Spanish town. Their horses were in different stables and corrals. The men themselves were scattered about at that hour. How they spent the night was their own affair. When Captain Hood rode into Military Plaza at daybreak they would be there, mounted and ready for the trail. That was all he asked of them.

Captain Hood was thinking of these things, when a grim, grizzled old sergeant entered his quarters, and standing at ease, said: "I have to report, sir, that Privates Kent and Raymond have been killed."

"Killed! Why, they just joined up today!"

"Yes, sir. I'm afraid they were not as watchful as they should have been." The sergeant went on to report the killing in the *Red Ace,* as he had been able to learn it.

"Are the police after this Colin Hays?"

"Why, no, sir. He escaped out of the city limits, and they say they have no jurisdiction. They have turned the matter over to the sheriff."

"Did anybody have sense enough to find out which way he went?" snapped Hood.

"Yes, sir. It is reported that he crossed the river at a ford below the old mill and headed straight south."

"I see. Well, the company has orders to get into the mountains and on the trail of Victorio. We can't stay here to hunt for this Colin Hays. Find White and Pearson and send them to me at once."

The sergeant went out, with two thoughts in his mind. One was that the company was going into an Indian raid without two of its best men. The other was that Colin Hays had best ride while the riding was good.

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HALF AN hour later two men entered the Captain's quarters. If the borders of the world had been searched two men less alike in appearance could not have been found: Cy White was six foot and so perfectly proportioned that he didn't look tall. He wasn't handsome, but good looking, with a clean, strong face, cold-gray eyes, and a fighting chin. Lew Pearson was a dwarf. Five foot four in high-heeled boots, bow-legged from a life in the saddle, carrot-colored hair, and eyes like blue marbles. He had been a scout in the service for several years, with an especial interest in Indians. He knew their every trick, for he had spent several years as a captive among them, and could read a trail as other men read a printed page.

For some unaccountable reason, these two chummed up in the service: White, twenty when he joined Company M, and now only twenty four. Pearson's age no man could tell, although his carroty hair was getting roan at the temples.

From the first, Lew, unlettered and ignorant of books, had admired White's education. On the other hand, White had never ceased to marvel at Pearson's uncanny instinct as a man-hunter. The two of them were a combination hard to beat.

"White," said Captain Hood, "you've heard what happened at the *Red Ace?*"

"Yes, sir."

"From what I can gather, the killing of Kent and Raymond, as well as that of Platte, was cold murder. The com-

pany has to march at daybreak for the west. I want Colin Hays; take Pearson and go on his trail. Get him alive if you can, but—get him. I don't know anything except that he crossed the river below the old mill and headed south. Did either of you know Hays?"

"I know him when I see him," said Cy White.

"That'll help some. Get on the trail and when you finish the job, hunt for the command. I have no idea where it will be."

AT DAYBREAK Cy White, leading the chase after the dangerous Hays, with Lew Pearson on the leash like a bloodhound, was beating about the country ten miles south of San Antonio, looking for a trail. Presently, Lew picked it up. A shod horse had gone that way, and it had been running. Shod horses were not common in that open-range country.

They followed the trail for five miles, then stopped for consultation.

"Heading straight south," said Cy. "You know this country, Lew. What's down there?"

"Nothing," growled Lew. "That is, nothing but mesquite, catclaw, huisache, chaparral, pear thickets, and maybe a ranch every thirty or forty miles."

"He won't go far in a country like that."

"Huh! Maybe not. Unless he's heading for Bagdad. If he is, we got a chance to catch him; it's about three hundred miles to Bagdad."

"Bagdad! What do you mean?"

"I mean Bagdad. Don't you know where Bagdad is?"

"Yes. It's over in Asia, somewhere. The home of the Caliphs in the Arabian Nights."

"No. Guess again. This Bagdad is just across the Rio Grande, down below Fort Brown. I heard a fellow say how it happened to be there. It was mostly built by smugglers, blockade runners, and pirates, during the Civil War. He said there never were many decent people there. After the war, business played out; the few decent ones left, and it is a pretty tough place. There may be Caliphs and things there; I don't know. The fellow that told me about Bagdad said it used to be a seaport and front door to the city of Matamoras, but now it's the back door to hell."

"Sounds rough."

"It is rough. My guess is that Colin Hays is going there. If we can catch him before he crosses into Mexico, all right; if he gets across the river, we lose him. He's going as fast as horses will carry him. We have to ride a little faster to catch him. Them's the facts, if you want to try—"

"I don't want to try anything," snapped Cy, his fighting jaw protruding. "Cap'n Hood told me to get Colin Hays, and I'm going after him."

"That sounds natural," grinned Lew. "I can trail him, but these horses of ours can't run three hundred miles."

"We'll get fresh horses whenever we can; and when we can't, we'll walk and carry our saddles if our horses play out. Hit the trail."

It was nearing sunset, and their horses were thoroughly spent, when Lew, who was in the lead, drew rein and pointed ahead, where the trail ran through an open glade. Out in the glade stood a fine horse, its sides slashed and bloody from spurs. The animal stood still, its head down and its body quivering. They rode up to it. On the ground, a little way from the horse, lay a dead man and a saddle.

"What do you make of that, Lew?" asked the young ranger.

"Simple enough. That fine horse wasn't used to rough stuff. Hays rode him to death. Then he met this Mexican vaquero, shot him and took his horse. That's the kind of gent we're following; he'll get fresh mounts when he wants 'em."

Five miles farther on, they came to a ranch cabin. The ranchman was at

home. They told their story, describing the dead man they had found.

"One of my riders," said the ranchman. "If you boys aim to catch Hays before he crosses into Mexico, you've got to ride. Get something to eat. I'll have horses roped out for you. Fifty miles from here is another ranch. When you get there, you can change; from there on, you'll have to take chances."

So the chase began, and so it kept up for four more days. Twice again the rangers found dead riders, where Colin Hays had changed horses in his own peculiar way. Twice they roped saddle horses on the range and changed to fresh mounts. The rangers slept barely enough to keep them alive and had such food as they could get at occasional ranch cabins.

LATE IN the afternoon of their fifth day out, they came upon the trail of a hurrying rider.

"That's our man," said Lew, "and his horse is about all in. Those tracks are pretty fresh. We've gained a lot on him. If we had some fresh horses we might pick him up yet. It's fifty miles to where he'll cross the Rio Grande, and—"

Lew stopped. The sound of a single shot had come to them across the dense chaparral. It had been fired directly on the course they were following.

"There he is!" said Cy. "Come on. We've got to get him while he's changing horses or not at all. On a fresh mount, he'll ride right away from us." Spurring their winded horses into a weary lope, they rode on through the wilderness.

As they reached an open glade in the chaparral, they heard the quick thudding of hoofs. White tried to urge his weary beast forward, drawing his gun as he drove in his spurs. Lew caught his bridle and stopped him.

"No use, Cy," the old scout muttered. "He's mounted and gone. If we rode into that glade, he might see us. Chances are he thinks nobody is on his trail. He's getting close to safety now, and he may slow up a bit. If we can get some fresh horses, we'll race him that fifty miles."

"You're right as usual, Lew, but we can't let him cross that river. We've got to get him on this side."

They rode out into the glade. There was the telltale spent horse, the saddle and the dead man on the ground, that had marked other changes of mounts that Hays had made. They spent little time there. Fresh horses were a pressing necessity now. They were almost on their quarry.

Just at nightfall they came upon a band of saddle horses. They didn't know who these horses belonged to, but they meant to change and take a chance. Roping two of the best, they changed saddles and were gone again, but outraged nature rebelled. They had to stop and sleep.

The rising sun woke them. Lew estimated the distance to be forty miles from their camp to where Hays would cross the river.

With only a few bites of cold food and a little water, they pushed on. Twice in the afternoon they sighted Hays crossing strips of open, sandy prairie in the coast country. His horse was reeling as it went, and the killer was belaboring it cruelly. The horses of the rangers were in no better shape, and try as they would, they couldn't gain on the fugitive.

The sun had set and the purple shadows were gathering in the willows as they gained the bank of the Rio Grande, well below Fort Brown. There was a little shack on the river bank. Near it stood a spent horse, with the saddle still on its back. Skirting the willows on the farther shore of the broad, tawny stream, a small boat was drifting down the river toward the ruins of Bagdad.

Cy White cursed bitterly, and impatiently, as he stood on the bank and watched Colin Hays escape. Presently,

his tired shoulders went up, and his chin out.

"Hays is gone but not forgotten," he rasped out. "I aim to get him."

"If he comes back on this side, yes," said Lew; "but if he's got any sense he won't come back."

"I don't know just where the line of Mexico is along here. All I know is that Colin Hays killed two of my friends in cold blood, and the Captain told me to get him.

"He didn't say anything about not crossing rivers, there's no name printed on this stream. I don't know what river it is, and I don't want to be told."

"I won't tell you," grinned White.

"All right. There's nobody about this shack. Let's get these horses back a ways, turn them loose to graze, and hide our saddles. Then we'll come back here, eat everything we can find, and be ready for that gentleman when he comes back with the boat."

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THE RANGERS went through the shack. A generous meal had been cooked and a pot of steaming coffee was waiting. They ate ravenously of goat meat and tortillas. Fortified by the food, they were ready for further adventure.

Cy White, as leader of the chase, had been thoughtful while eating. They went from the shack to a point on the river bank where they could watch for the man who had rowed Hays across to the Mexican side, and then drifted down the stream with him.

The two rangers had performed their full duty in the chase. They had done all that was humanly possible to catch Hays on Texas soil, only to miss him by inches.

Cy knew that Lew Pearson would follow him anywhere, but as they sat in the gathering night, alertly watching and listening, he was thinking the situation over. At last he spoke in a low tone.

"Lew, this shack in the willows has got no business here. It is evidently part of a line of travel for crooks and outlaws who want to cross back and forth from Texas to Mexico. The old ferry at Fort Brown is operated under a franchise from the Mexican Government, and no one else has a right to run a ferry for a fee on this part of the river. The fellow that lives here, and runs this boat, is not doing it for the fees. He belongs to some organized gang, and is probably as bad as the worst of them. When he lands, we've got to get him, quick and without noise. After that—"

"Hush! Listen!" warned Lew.

The dip of oars and swirl of water and the cheeping of oarlocks came to them faintly across the turgid water of the Rio Grande.

"Into the willows!" whispered Cy. "When he beaches his boat and stoops over to drag it out, we'll go onto him."

The boat came on, grounded on the sandy bar, and the man stepped ashore. He stooped over to drag his skiff out. The next moment he sprang up in surprise. A gun jabbed him in the ribs on either side, and the low voice of Cy White commanded.

"Get your hands up and keep your mouth closed. We don't want any noise here."

THE MAN'S hands were up; his gun and a wicked knife were taken from him before he recovered from his surprise. They took him into the shack and made a light. The man was a Mexican, but both rangers spoke Spanish as well as English.

"What are you doing running a ferry here?" demanded Cy. "Don't you know it is against the law?"

"But, senor, it is not a ferry I am running. I live here, and I keep one little boat for the fishing."

"Oh, for fishing! Was it your horse that stood in the willows, with the saddle on, ready to drop with hard riding? What were you running from? What have you done?"

"I, senor? I have done nothing but herd my goats. The horse—" and he stopped.

"Yes, the horse. We unsaddled it and turned it loose to graze. If it is not yours, where is the man who rode it? We are rangers and we're after him; what did you do with him?"

There was a combination of hate and fear in the man's eyes. "I shall tell you, senor. I had just prepared my supper and was ready to eat, when the man came here and asked me to set him across the river. I invited him to eat, but he jerked his gun and drove me to the boat. When we were on the stream he held his gun on me and made me row for my life. I am sorry if he was a bad man, and I helped him escape, but he made me do it."

"I see. Where did you take him?"

"Across the river, senor."

"Does it take two or three hours to cross the river and return?"

"No, senor. Half an hour, perhaps."

"Fine! When we came here at sunset, you had crossed to the other side and were drifting down the river. Where did you take Colin Hays?"

"I do not know Colin Hays."

"Where did you take the man who drove you into the boat?"

"Why—I... Oh, senor, he will kill me if I tell!"

"And I'll kill you if you don't tell and tell pronto," snapped Cy. "Out with it."

"But, senor, it can do no good. Texas rangers cannot go into Mexico, and—"

"Tell me where you took Hays!" Cy's gun clicked ominously.

"No, no, no, senor! I tell. I took him to the landing this side of Bagdad."

"That's better. Now, you're going to take us to the landing this side of Bagdad. Make some more coffee and eat your supper. You'll need it, for you're going to be busy and may not eat again for a while. What's your name?"

"Jose Ramos, senor."

Cy looked at him narrowly. "That will do as well as any. Hurry with your supper and don't try any tricks. If you do—"

Cy didn't finish, but his implied threat seemed to have no ill effect on Jose. Ramos seemed quite happy as he prepared and ate his food, then rolled and lighted a corn shuck cigarette.

"Swallow that smoke," advised Cy. "There'll be no smoking on the river."

WHEN THE boat pushed off a few minutes later, Jose had a ranger behind him and another in front of him. He was unarmed, and at their mercy, yet he seemed unconcerned. The boat sped along on the slow current, with Jose pulling vigorously. He had been rowing more than an hour, when he rested on his oars, and said: "The landing is just beyond that point, senor. From there it is a mile or two on to Bagdad."

"Then we don't want to land here. We want to go to Bagdad."

"But, senor, it is many miles to Bagdad following the river. It is on the sea, across the point. This landing is the nearest way. Besides, this little boat could not weather the surf at the mouth of the river."

"Oh, that way! All right. Drift in under the willows—and no noise now. If there is any talking done, I'll do it."

Cy didn't know the country, nor did Lew. The Mexican's statement sounded reasonable, so Cy took it for the truth, whether it was or not. The boat stole along under the willows, turned the point, and brought up at the tiny landing that was made of odds and ends of boards.

Cy had stepped out of the boat before he noticed a *jacal*. It resembled the one where Jose lived, on the other side. Jose had made no move, but sat

holding his boat against the little wharf with one hand.

"Come on!" ordered Cy.

"But, senor, I am not coming."

Cy's gun clicked in the darkness, and Jose came out of the boat with alacrity, just as Lew sprang ashore. The Mexican made no effort to secure the boat, as Cy supposed he would, but suddenly, as he stood there between the two rangers, he raised his head and let out a terrific yell. It was barely past his teeth when Lew's gun crashed on his head. He dropped to the ground.

At the same instant the door of the *jacal* burst open and three men came out. They stopped in a group not two hundred feet from the rangers, listened a moment, then hearing nothing, began talking excitedly among themselves.

"Come on!" whispered Cy. He picked up the insensible Jose in his arms and darted into the willows below the landing. The boat had already drifted away from the little wharf. It would go back upstream, or it would go out to sea, according to what the tide was doing just then. In any event, Cy and Lew were not likely to cross back to Texas in that boat—if at all.

"In hell with the door shut," mused Lew, as he glanced at the drifting boat, and followed Cy on into the willows.

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THEY WENT a quarter of a mile before Cy laid his burden down and took breath.

"Jose is a little man," he panted, "but he's awful limber and hard to carry."

"Wait here and rest," said Lew, "until I look about a bit." He stole softly away into the low timber and chaparral that grew on that part of the point.

While Lew was gone, Cy had time to do a bit of thinking. He had done a foolhardy thing; now he was in Mexico, violating an international treaty. It would be all right to take Hays back to the other side of the river, if no one found it out—but was it likely he could do that? These and other thoughts had cooled his ardor for the chase when Lew finally came back to where he waited, just as Jose stirred and sat up.

"What are we going to do with this fellow?" asked Cy.

"Huh! I didn't hit him hard enough."

"Yes, you did. I don't want him killed; we may need him before we get out of this mess."

"I don't see what for. If we want to get this gang over here after us, we don't need him to yell for us. All we need is to make one little false move and we'll get a knife in our backs. One thing is certain: we can't lug him around all over Mexico. I found an old deserted shack a little way from here. We'll gag him, tie him up, and leave him there."

A few minutes later, with Jose safely bound and gagged, and hidden in the abandoned cabin, the two rangers stole off toward Bagdad. When they had gone a short distance, Lew, who was leading, said:

"We better decide what we're going to do. We might get back across the river now by stealing a boat somewhere. Once we tangle with anybody over here, the only way out will be to shoot ourselves loose from whatever grabs at us. You know what a Mexican jail is like. If we get into one, we'll die there, because there is no excuse for us being on this side."

"I thought Jose could lead us right to Hays," said Cy, ruefully. "We could take him back and leave him on the landing where some one would find him. Then we could steal a boat and cross to the Texas side. As long as we were in Texas, it was your duty to follow me, because it was orders. When we crossed the river, that order was

out. It's up to you. I won't try to go on by myself, and I won't order you to do anything on this side of the river."

"No!" growled Lew. "It is not up to me. I'll follow you anywhere. I want to lay hands on Hays as much as you do. I was just telling you what we're up against. It makes no difference where I get killed. A lot of my life is behind me, and I'm nothing but a trailer, anyway. You're young. I'd hate—"

"Never mind that," interrupted Cy; "if that's all, we're going after Hays. Lead on."

"There's just one way to go. Here is the road that leads across the point to Bagdad. I never was there, but I've got a pretty good picture of the place in my mind from what I've heard. We can't sneak in. We'll just take the road and walk boldly into town. We both speak Spanish. It's too dark for anyone to see what we look like. What happens after we get there is up to you. I'm just a trailer, you lead."

"All right. Let's go."

THE NIGHT was inky dark to anyone else, but not to those eyes of Lew. A mile farther on they began passing tumble-down shacks and *jacals*.

"Nobody in these," said Lew. "When the town blowed up, most of the business people went to Matamoras and the rabble moved into the better residences."

"We're not interested in residences," replied Cy. "We'll find Colin Hays in the best gambling joint in town. It's the business part of the city we want to find."

They walked on. The shacks became thicker and formed a street. The roadway followed the middle of the street. On each side stood long puddles of stagnant water, and the foul smells of an unsanitary town greeted their nostrils. They climbed a considerable rise. On the left-hand side of the street, houses of one story stood close together. On the right beginning at the intersection of a cross-street, was a wall, seven or eight feet high. Either a cemetery or the stockade of the local prison, Cy thought with a shiver.

A few lights were showing from windows across the street from the wall. Lew stole to the corner of the enclosure and stopped.

"What now?" asked Cy.

"Got to keep close to this wall. Can't risk those lights. This is the main road into town and the safest one to follow." He stole forward, close against the wall, with Cy at his heels.

There was a fair walk along the wall. Cy wondered that such a walk would be made by a cemetery. Suddenly, there rose out of the darkness something higher than the wall. This turned out to be a building, its long front and barred windows flush with the wall. The jail and court, thought Cy.

They stopped abruptly. A light shot from a window, just as they reached the front of the building. It came from the first window in the wall. Cy wished he was on the other side of the street where he could peep in from the shadows, but it wasn't safe to cross. He crept forward to the side of the window. It was open; he could hear voices.

"That's the last trip I make like that, Uncle Jud," said a voice. "I've had something to eat and drink, and now I want to sleep a week."

"Tell me, did you get Zeb Platte?"

"Yes, I got him, but two of their damned Texas rangers were watching me; I had to kill them, or I never would have got away. I'd been looking for Platte for weeks, and he had just come back to town. I couldn't wait. Platte had cleaned me in a poker game, and I had no way to get more money."

"Well, it's all right," said the man called Uncle Jud. "There's just one more that has to be got before I can go back to the United States with safety, and I want to get back there. It was all right to make money here in Bagdad in the flush times, but the

place is dead now, and I want to go back and live like a prince. When you get the other man that knows too much—"

"No!" protested Hays. "I've had enough. Two rangers chase me three hundred miles and I barely beat them to the river. Let somebody else—"

"Then you have decided that you don't want Della, after all," said Jud in a soft, regretful tone. "I'm sorry, but—"

"You know I do want her!" snarled Hays. "But look at the price you are making me pay."

"You agreed to the price."

"I know I did, but I didn't think of anything like that trip from San Antonio here. It was hell, I tell you."

"The work is half done and you are safe; what more do you want? Take more money next time, so you won't go broke in a game. You won't find the other man in a gambling den. You'll find him in business at New Orleans, and—"

"You can tell me all that later. I've got to sleep, but before I go to sleep I want to see Della, and—"

"Not tonight, son. When Martin Rayford made me his daughter's guardian, he didn't know in what good hands he was placing Della and her fortune. Tomorrow, perhaps, not tonight."

WITH A muttered oath, Colin Hays rose and left the room. The other emitted a sort of crowing chuckle. Cy couldn't resist a peep into that window. He almost gasped with surprise as he peered around the casement. A rather good-looking man of athletic build sat alone in the room, thoughtfully smoking. He had a strong face, and the same dark, arched brow that marked the face of Hays; the two were evidently kin. If the man he saw had not condemned himself out of his own mouth, as a procurer of murder, Cy would have taken him to be a cultured gentleman of leisure.

He had never heard of the man in his life, until he listened at that window, but something told Cy he was dangerous. That he would cross fire with this unknown whom Bagdad knew as Jud Pelon.

To the ranger, Pelon was just another murderer on the border. He had seen the elegant ones before; they were no novelty. The great surprise to him was in the furnishings of the room. Never in his life had Cy White, a plain Texan, seen such Oriental splendor. True, he had read of it, but here it was before his eyes. This was unquestionably Bagdad, home of the Caliphs.

Pelon rose leisurely, blew out the light, and left the room. Cy stood for a moment rubbing his eyes in the darkness, trying to make himself believe that he had dreamed it all. He was brought out of his trance by Lew pulling at his arm, and whispering a warning in his ear.

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STANDING by the open window they could hear footfalls, as Jud Pelon went to another part of the house. Then came silence. Not a sound anywhere.

"We've got to get away from here!" warned Lew, in a low tone. "He left that window open. It is about midnight. Some one will make the final round of the house pretty soon, and run square into us."

"I don't want to get away from here," whispered Cy. "Colin Hays is in that house, and I'm going in after him. The man who hired Hays to do all this killing is also in there, and I'd like to take him along for good measure. He says he wants to go to the United States, and I'd like to take him with—"

"Yes, and there's plenty more in

there. You'll get a knife in your back before you get your foot over the door-sill. Anyway, we can't get in. We'll just have to wait until Hays comes out. Come on. We'll hide up and— Too late! There comes the watch!"

Some one was coming slowly along the front of the house, through the pitchy darkness. From the sound of the steps, it was clearly one person.

"Flat against the wall, and keep still," ordered Cy.

The watchman came on, reached the corner of the house, and turned back. He took one step on the return journey, and that was all. Cy had got the measure of this place from the conversation between Pelon and Hays. There was probably nobody in it that didn't need killing.

Springing forward, he struck once with his gun, and the man went down. Whether he was dead or not didn't matter. It would at least be some time before he took an active interest in the affairs of Bagdad.

"Come on," said Cy. "He came out of that place, and probably left a door or gate open." He stole softly forward, feeling his way along the wall.

The few lights along the opposite side of the street had gone out, and that part of the ruined old town was in total darkness. There was no sound, save the occasional crowing of a cock for the midnight hour, and the far-off booming of the surf.

They passed several barred windows, then the closed front door, which they tried softly and found securely locked. Moving cautiously on along the wall, they passed several other windows and had come to the last one, when a whispering voice stopped them:

"Is it you, Antone?" the whisperer asked, in Spanish. "Did you meet Sylvestre, and kill him? Speak, Antone! Why don't you speak?"

All this was whispered in halting and very poor Spanish. Whether that hoarse whisper came from man, woman, boy or girl, could not be told by the sound, and nothing could be seen, for the room from which it came was dark as the grave. Cy was wondering whether it was Sylvestre or Antone he had smashed over the head. Men do that in tight moments. He had to say something or be discovered for what he was.

"Yes, it is Antone," he whispered in Spanish.

"Then you got Sylvestre. Hurry to the postern gate. It will be open. Then come to the door of this room. It is barred on the outside. Raise the bar softly. I'll let you in, and we can discuss our plans in safety. Hurry!"

"But how can I enter the house?" ventured Cy.

"How! By the door in the end of the house. Sylvestre went out that way; I heard him, and he left the door on the latch. Do you not know this den of evil as well as I know it?"

"Yes, yes! I hurry," and Cy stole on into the darkness, with Lew at his heels. He wanted to know more, but didn't dare ask, for fear of betraying himself.

IT WAS PLAIN that Sylvestre had come from that direction, so the gate must be farther along the high wall of the enclosure. Fifty feet from the corner of the house, Cy stumbled and almost fell. Lew stooped down and felt on the ground.

"Huh!" he muttered. "Guess that's Antone. Sylvestre saw him first; he's still warm, but terrible dead."

"Let him be. We're looking for that gate."

"Gate! Are you going into that place? That fellow at the window was probably playing you for a sucker and—"

"Certainly I'm going in, if I can get in. I'm after Colin Hays, and he's in there, I tell you. I know him, and I saw him. There's no time to lose. We got to be back across the river by daylight."

"Maybe! Go ahead, I'm following

you from here on. If they take you to jail, you go by yourself. This nice gang can never take me, alive and all in one piece."

A few steps farther on they came to a low postern in the wall. The gate was not open, but a slight push threw it back without noise. When they were inside they closed the gate and latched it, then followed the wall back to the house.

Inside that wall was obviously an extensive garden or park. They could see the tops of trees of considerable height, against the skylight, and could smell the sweet odor of ripe oranges and pomegranates. Blended with this scent was the tang of the sea, brought to them on an east wind. The house fronted west, and they were now at the north end of it. No accurate estimate of its size could be made in the darkness, but the front was at least a hundred feet across, and it seemed to run back into the garden that far, or farther.

Cy guessed that this room at the corner which faced the street, where the voice had whispered to him, opened at its back side on a corridor. The door would be about twenty feet from the corner. Carefully he counted his steps as he followed along the wall of the house east, and at the eighth step he found the door—opened it. Listening a moment, they crept along the wall on their right. Here was the room of the whisperer. Cy removed the bar without noise and the door immediately swung open.

"Come in, quickly!" came the whispered voice.

THEY STEPPED into a room, in which there was no ray of light, and stopped side by side, each with his gun in his hand. They had no idea who, or how many, might be in that room. That might have been the voice of Colin Hays himself. Certainly Hays was not a prisoner, but he could lie. They heard the door swing shut, and the bolt slide with a faint click. Then a light step whispered across a thick carpet.

Cy's only assurance was that the person in this room was a prisoner, and would not betray him. That was presuming that this was not merely a trap for someone else that he had been caught in; Antone's death indicated such a possibility. So, each with his gun in his hand, ready for what might happen, stood waiting in the stilled darkness.

Waiting for what? Cy wondered. He could hear the beating of his own heart. Then a match scratched faintly, flared, and was applied to the wick of a glass lamp that stood on a table. Cy almost gasped. There was but one other person in the room—a woman.

She stood with her back to them as she lit the lamp, and the light falling through her golden hair looked like a halo around her head. She adjusted the wick of the lamp, then turned, expecting to see Antone. At sight of two armed men she almost fainted, but caught the arm of a chair and sat down instead.

"Who—who are you?" she gasped, still speaking in Spanish.

"Friends," replied Cy. "Speak English. It will be easier for you."

Cy White was looking at the loveliest woman he had ever seen in his life, and he had seen many. Her wide blue eyes had a startled look in them just now, but her features were all but perfect.

"But, Antone! Where is Antone?"

"Was he a small man?"

"Not a man at all, just a boy. He was my only friend in this terrible place. Tell me where he is?"

"I'm sorry, but I think he is dead."

"Dead! Then all hope is gone!" and she hid her face in her hands and wept while the rangers looked on in silence. Presently she looked up through tears: "Was it you to whom I talked at the window?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I thought you were in danger, and came to see if I could assist you."

"No! I didn't mean that. You are in danger every moment in this house. Fly from it, quickly!"

"Calm yourself. The danger may not be so great. You said you would talk over your plans with Antone. Will you not tell them to me?"

"Why—I— You are not friends of Pelon, of Colin Hays?"

"No, but we are willing to be friends to you."

"Pardon me, sir, but I don't know whom I may trust in this house. I may as well tell you the plan. It is simple. Antone had a boat hid in the willows, below the landing on the river. If he could release me, we were going to the boat, cross the river, and go to Fort Brown, on the Texas side."

"I see. Do you think you could find that boat?"

"I don't know. Antone was to lead the way. If I could find the landing, I think I could find the boat."

"We can find the landing."

"Oh, if you could only go with me, but—you mustn't. They would murder you if they found you with me."

"Who would?"

"Jud Pelon and Colin Hays."

"We'll take you to Fort Brown, in due time," said Cy, calmly. "We have some other matters to attend to first, though. What place is this?"

"It is called the House of Caliph. It is the home of Jud Pelon, who was the head of the gang of smugglers, blockade-runners and pirates who built Bagdad. The town sprang up like a mushroom, and when its season was past it decayed like a mushroom."

"And is all the house furnished as richly as this room?"

"This is the poorest room in the house. Why shouldn't it be furnished with the richest things on earth? They came in pirate ships across the seven seas. Every article you see represents innocent blood that has been spilled."

"Where is the principal part of the town?"

"Principal part? There is no town left, except this place and the block of mean shops opposite it, together with the scattering shacks farther out from the beach. The main part of the town was swept away by a tidal wave, years ago. This was spared because it was on higher ground.... But why do I foolishly tell you such things at a time like this? If we are to escape, we must be on our way."

"There is no great hurry. In fact, I am not yet ready to go." Cy was coolly waiting for that deep slumber that comes just before morning, to make his investigation of the House of Caliph. "Are you, by any chance, Della Rayford?"

"Yes, that is my name. One thing I must tell you; don't trust Jud Pelon. He has the kindest, softest voice in the world, and cruelest heart. My father trusted him, to my sorrow. Father made Pelon executor of his will, and my guardian. Pelon had me brought here from New Orleans a year ago At first I was carried away with the beauty of the garden, and the strange charm of the rambling old house, with its wonderful furnishings, but I soon found that I was not a guest, but a prisoner.

"According to the law of this country, I am Pelon's chattel, and he can do as he likes with me. He would do that anyway, for he has no regard for any law. He is trading me, and perhaps a part of my fortune, to Hays, for something. I have no idea what the trade is, but I know I loathe and despise Colin Hays. So, you can see why I want to escape."

CY KNEW what that trade was. He knew that this lovely girl and her fortune were to be bartered to Colin Hays for the murders he committed. He knew that Pelon would keep the

bargain, too, or Hays would kill him. He was thinking of these things, when the girl went on:

"Why won't you go now? Every moment we wait lessens our chance of escape."

"If you should go now, would you have any of your fortune?"

"Why—Jud Pelon told me it was safely invested in the United States."

"Yes, and probably in his name. Set ashore at Fort Brown, penniless, would be little better than staying here it seems to me."

"Oh, no! Nothing could be as horrible as being Colin Hays' wife! He is a cold, slimy thing, I tell you. He is a murderer! Please let's go now, while we have a chance."

"Calm yourself, Miss Rayford. I told you there were some other matters to be attended to before we could go. Can you make me a plan of this house, showing where Pelon and Hays sleep?"

"Yes, I can make a plan, but you're not— Please don't talk to Jud Pelon. I tell you he is the smoothest-tongued pirate and liar in the world. He'll make you believe that I am insane, and that he is the most abused man in America."

"No. I have heard him condemn himself out of his own mouth. I'm going to bring him to book before I leave this house."

"Then I'll make the plan, but there is no hope that you can succeed. Besides Pelon and Hays, there are others just as bad, somewhere in the house, and always on call."

The girl sketched rapidly on a sheet of paper. Under her deft hand the plan of the house grew. It was a rectangle, with a wide hall running from front to back, and corridors leading from the hall on either side. In two rooms on opposite sides of the hall, and about midway its length, she placed crosses.

The one on the south side of the hall, she explained, was Pelon's living quarters; that immediately across the hall was occupied by Hays.

She marked the room in which they were, and other rooms on the north of the hall, but said she knew nothing of what was on the south side except Pelon's room. She had not been permitted to visit that part of the house.

The two rangers studied the plan intently, as it grew. They were going out into those dark corridors presently. It was Cy's purpose to lay hands on Pelon, first, and make him tell a few things. After that, they would take care of events as they befell. He was talking in a low tone, asking questions about the plan. Suddenly the girl stiffened in her chair, and her eyes went wide with horror. Someone was coming along the corridor, outside the door.

"Sit still!" whispered Cy, "and play the game. The door is locked. Wait, and see what happens."

There was no long wait. Things began to happen at once, and they didn't stop for a while.

"Della!" called Pelon, hammering on the door. "Open this door. Someone has unbarred it on the outside. Who are you talking to in there? I told Colin he was not to see you tonight."

"There is no one here," returned Della, under Cy's instruction. "I was only saying my prayers."

"Then you say your prayers in a mighty coarse voice. Open the door, I command you!"

"I'll open it, but—"

"But nothing! Open, or I'll break it down."

Cy and Lew went over and stood by the side of the door. Della blew out the light, then stole to the door. She opened it in such a manner that she would be behind it, and the rangers on the opposite side from her. Pelon strode into the dark room. The door closed softly behind him, and the bolt clicked home. He struck a match and relit the lamp. Then turning to face the handsome Colin Hays, whom he expected to find

in the room with his ward, he looked into the muzzles of two guns.

"GET YOUR hands up!" rapped Cy, in a low voice. Pelon's hands went up; he was so astonished that Lew had his gun before he recovered his wits.

"Sit down, and keep quiet," ordered Cy.

The Caliph of Bagdad sank into a chair by the table, and the two rangers stood over him.

"Why, Della!" he said, in the softest voice imaginable, completely ignoring the two men. "I'm astonished that you would have such company as this in your room at night. I've been thinking for some time that your mind was giving way, but—"

"That'll do!" snapped Cy. "I know your line, mister. I want you to talk to me."

"Certainly I'll talk to you, sir. You two gentlemen have made a terrible mistake. This young lady is sadly demented, and thinks she is a prisoner in my house. She has probably called on you to aid her to escape. I don't know who you are, or how you got into my house, but I know you have made a mistake. I could call to my men, and have you put out, but I won't do that. As *Alcalde* of this district I could—"

"Since when did the Mexican government begin making officers of American citizens?" asked Cy.

Pelon started. These men were Americans, like himself. Platte was dead, but there was still one man on the other side of the Rio Grande who knew too much. These fellows were after him, and he couldn't appeal to the Mexican government. That government showed little interest in the sinful spot where the city of Bagdad had once been. If those who remained there were destroyed to the last man, official Mexico would probably shrug its shoulders and say good riddance.

Sweat broke out on Pelon's face, fear gripped him, and he opened his mouth to call for help. The cry never started from his throat. Cy White's long hands closed on his neck.

"I said no noise!" grated Cy. "If you go out of this room alive, it will be because you keep plenty still. If you even try to call again, that will be the end for you. I know you hired Colin Hays to kill Zeb Platte, and another man. He'll give me the facts about you, and then I'll take you both across the river."

"You'll never take me!" snarled Pelon.

"That remains to be seen. Just now I have something else in mind. You claim to be this young lady's guardian. Where are the papers in regard to her estate?"

"None of your business!" snapped Pelon. "You can rob me, but you can't make me help you do it. More than that, don't think you'll ever get out of this house alive with any of your loot."

Cy nodded to Lew; in a trice Pelon's hands were manacled to his feet with two pairs of good American handcuffs, and a gag was in his mouth.

"Now, Miss Rayford," said Cy, "you'll have to help us a little. Take Pelon's pistol. If he even tries to give an alarm, put it to his head and pull the trigger. You know what will happen to you if he gives an alarm. When we get out, bolt the door, and be sure that it is us calling, before you open it. We'll be back with you as soon as we can."

The two rangers slipped out into the dark corridor. Slowly they felt their way on toward the main hall of the rambling old mansion. They were after Colin Hays. In a room on that main hall, Hays was supposedly asleep after his long race for the safety of Bagdad. That room, and the man who was in it, was their main objective, as they pushed forward by inches toward that main hall.

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GROPING slowly forward in the black darkness, Cy White's keen mind was doing double duty. He listened, watched, but at the same time he was analyzing his position. Technically he was a house-breaker and a robber. Ranger as he was, he had passed out of the country where he had any semblance of authority for search and seizure.

It was not unusual for Texas rangers to become a law unto themselves in their search for criminals in their own state. They had even crossed the borders of other states, in their pursuit of outlaws. But this invasion of another nation carried with it no such prerogatives. If he and Lew were caught in the act, by officers of the Mexican government, regardless of how badly Bagdad might need a cleaning, there would be little hope for them. They would not be rangers, before the law, but simply gringoes, who had invaded the country to war on its people.

All these things ran through Cy's mind. With them was the thought that it was now well past midnight. The boat that Antone had hidden on the river was about two miles from Bagdad. When they had finished with the House of the Caliph, they had yet to conduct Della Rayford—and their prisoners, if any—that two miles, find the boat, and escape to the Texas side before daylight. There was no time to waste.

They had turned into the great hall leading from front to back of the house, and started toward Hays' door. Another thought came to Cy's mind. Colin Hays was a daring killer. Why did he let Pelon drive a hard bargain with him? Why didn't he kill the Caliph, and have done with it?

These thoughts were suddenly interrupted and Cy stopped and stood flat against the wall, with Lew by his side. A door on the left, and a little in front of them, opened softly. A dim light fell on the slender form of Colin Hays!

There was light enough from the candle in Hays' room to see that he carried a pistol in one hand, and a long, glittering knife in the other. He was looking straight across the wide hall to another door; he did not turn his head. With cat-like tread, he crossed the hall, and tried the door. It was unlocked; he pushed it open and stole into the room.

"He's gone bronc at last!" whispered Cy. "He thinks he's going to kill Pelon. We've got to get him now, or never. Come on!"

They crept forward to Pelon's door. A dim light from the candle in Hays' room enabled them to see quite plainly. Pelon's door was slightly ajar. They heard thudding blows in the room, and cold chills ran over them. Those blows were knife-thrusts. There was a low, gurgling groan, and then silence. A moment later a light flared in Pelon's room, and they heard Hays walking softly about.

"Here we go!" whispered Cy.

The door swung noiselessly open. Colin Hays was standing by the bed, with a puzzled expression on his dark face. On the pillow was a gray, distorted face, but it was not the face of Jud Pelon!

The room was large, and another door at the back gave exit from it. Obviously, the canny Pelon had feared such an attack, and had put someone else in his own bed, while he slept elsewhere.

"Get your hands up, Hays!" commanded Cy quietly.

The killer whirled from the bed, a bloody knife in one hand, a pistol in the other. His teeth were bared in cold

rage—the ghost-lights were flaunting in his bright brown eyes. He jerked his gun up as he came around, and fired; but he fired an instant too late. A bullet from Lew's gun was in his brain when he pulled the trigger and missed.

"Watch the door, while I take a look at things," snapped Cy. "We've got to work fast, now."

THEIR CHASE was ended. They had got Colin Hays, and got him in a way that they approved for such men.

By all reasonable rules of caution, the rangers should have got out of that accursed house with all possible speed. The trouble was that Cy White knew no rules of caution. He had not gone crazy over Della Rayford's beauty, nor was he likely to do that. He had seen beautiful women before, and being an attractive man, many had smiled on him. He simply meant to play a square game.

Della didn't know it, but she had helped him to get Colin Hays. He had told her that he would take her across the river, and he meant to do just that—or else not go across himself. He knew only what the girl had told him of her relation to Jud Pelon. But there was plenty of evidence that Mexico was getting decidedly warm for Mr. Pelon, and he was preparing to get back into the United States. Otherwise, he would not have gone to the trouble and expense of disposing of his enemies across the Rio Grande from Bagdad.

These thoughts were in Cy's mind, as he looked the place over. The room he was in was large and richly furnished. There was the one canopied bed, which just now bore a gruesome occupant, and other articles that indicated a combination bedroom and livingroom. Nothing there indicated a treasure chest.

Cy tried the door at the back of the room. It gave, and swung open. Lighted candle in hand, he looked in. . . .No one was there. The same Oriental splendor was shown in its furnishing, but Cy paid it little heed. A massive, brass-bound chest caught his eye. The key was in the lock. He raised the lid and saw that the chest was empty, save for a small, strong leather bag. The bag was locked. With a slash of his knife he cut around the lock.

There was time for no more than a glance at its contents. Negotiable securities comprised the bulk of what was in it. Two other documents he saw, and closed the bag with a snap. Jerking a silk cord from a rich tapestry, he tied the bag fast.

With the bag in his hand, Cy returned to where Lew waited and watched at the door. There had not been another sound in the house since the two shots were fired, almost as one. The other occupants were either in a remote quarter, or were very sound sleepers.

"What now?" asked Lew.

"We're going to take Pelon and the girl across the river. I have an idea that Pelon will be promptly hanged, when the proper authorities get hold of him."

"Huh! We better shoot him, and take ourselves across the river, before the rurales get on our trail. What's that in your hand?"

"Some of Mr. Pelon's papers. I thought he might want them."

"Throw it away! If they catch us with anything that we took out of this house—"

"I'll take care of that. Let's get back to Pelon and the girl."

They started back along the hall, toward the corridor that led to the room where they had entered the house. They stopped with a jerk, as a hoarse cry rang through the house:

"Help! Help! Call the guard!"

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A DOOR flew open on their left. A man sprang into the hall and ran away from them. Lew reached for his gun, but Cy caught his arm.

"Don't shoot here. You'll miss, and they'll get us by the gun-flashes. After him, quick!"

The man ran down the hall and turned into the corridor that they meant to follow. When the two rangers reached the turn, the man was already at the door, calling:

"Here I am! What is it?"

"Call the guard, damn you!" roared Pelon.

The man shot on down the corridor.

"Now you've played hell!" snapped Lew Pearson. "We ought to have shot him. We'll never get out that little gate, now."

"My mistake. Let's get the girl, and make a run for it." Cy began knocking on the door.

"Open that door, you hussy!" yelled Pelon.

The door flew open, and Della sprang into the corridor, wild with fright. The lamp still burned on the table. Pelon lay on his back, on the floor, with his gun in one hand, but unable to do much with it in that position, as his hand was locked to his foot. Only for an instant could he have used it.

Old Lew threw something that hit the lamp with a metallic click. It was the bloody knife that he had taken from Hays' hand, while waiting for Cy. The glass crashed, the oil spread on the table. One look satisfied Lew that the oil had ignited, and he grimly followed Cy and the girl, who had gone on to the door, heading for the little gate.

"Through the postern, quick, before the guard comes!" panted Della.

"Where is the guard?"

"In the old calabozo, toward the beach a little way."

They were out in the garden now, heading for the gate. Then they stopped. The man who had run out of the house was standing at the gate, yelling, while other men came running up the slope, answering as they came.

"Back into the house!" snapped Cy.

They ran down the corridor toward the main hall. Pelon was screaming in terror as he tried to roll away from the burning table, but there was no time to pay any attention to him. They had to find a place where they could make a stand.

Turning to the right in the main hall, they sped to the front door. Cy found the bar and jerked it loose just as the guards came pouring into the house from the other side. They sprang out, pulled the door shut behind them.

Across the dirty street lights flashed in dingy little windows. What was left of the population of the ancient city of Bagdad-in-America promised to rise early for one morning, at least. Cy took one of the girl's hands, held the bag in his other. They started running along the wall, with Old Lew bringing up the rear.

They had gone almost a mile, and were beyond the last shacks of the town proper, when they stopped to draw breath. The first gray of dawn was showing in the east. It was still about a mile to where the boat was hidden, and then they would have to hunt for it. There was no time to be lost, but they couldn't run without breath. The rangers might have carried on a bit farther, but the girl was about spent.

They stopped on a bit of rising ground, and looked back toward the town.

"How did Pelon get that gag out of his mouth?" asked the young ranger.

"Why—he—he caught me off my

guard, and butted the breath out of me with his head. When I got my breath back, he had the gun, and made me unfasten the gag. They'll turn him loose, and then there'll be no hope. Come on. I can run again, now!"

"Just a moment. Get your breath. Who is this guard, and how many are there?"

"The remnant of Pelon's old gang. A dozen or more, and every one a hundred times a murderer. Then there is the rabble. They'll do anything Pelon tells them to do, for they fear him as if he were the fiend of the pit. If they catch us—" The girl stopped and shuddered. "Come on! I'll run as far as I can, and then crawl when I can run no longer."

"Look!" cried Cy, as a red finger of flame shot into the sky. "That's the House of the Caliph!"

"Looks part like it," drawled Lew.

"Oh, I hope it is!" cried Della. "If ever a house on earth should be burned, that one should. Come on, they'll catch us!"

THIS TIME they heeded her pleading and the three began running on toward the river. Della kept up the pace for another half a mile before her strength failed her. By that time they had reached an old 'dobe ruin that stood just where the two rangers had struck the road to Bagdad the night before, and were a short quarter of a mile from the river.

Cy was thinking they had a good lead. He could carry the girl that far, leaving the road right here. He was on the point of suggesting that course, when something stopped him. It was the pounding of hoofs on the trail. It had not occurred to him that the guard might be mounted.

"Quick!" said Cy. "We must get into that shack." Catching the girl up bodily, he led the way into the old ruin.

They were barely inside when six riders came dashing along the trail.

"It's just a dog-fight, now," said Cy grimly. "Every man we can get cuts down the odds that much. I'll take the leaders, and you take the ones behind, so we don't both shoot at the same man."

The riders came on. They were almost abreast of the old ruin when two plumes of flame spurted from it. The leader and the man behind went from their saddles; the others halted and returned the fire. Two more went down, and the others whirled and took the trail back to town.

"There goes the news!" said Cy. "Only quick work can save us now. Come on, Miss Rayford. I'll carry you if you can't walk. It's not far from here to the river. Lead the way to the shack where we left Jose, Lew."

"Let Jose go to the devil!" growled Lew. "He's got a better chance than Pelon had, and he's probably no better man."

"No! I won't leave even an outlaw tied up and gagged, to starve to death. Lead on to the shack, and make it lively. They'll be along pretty soon, and we've got to get away before they come."

It was not more than two hundred yards to the shack in the brush where they had left Jose, but it took them some time to find it. Walking slowly, while Lew sought the hidden cabin, the girl was rested by the time they reached the cabin. Jose lay where they had left him, breathing hard, struggling with his bonds.

"Cut him loose," ordered Cy. "Maybe we can use him in finding the boat. Anyway, we can't leave him here."

Lew slashed the bonds, and Jose stood up, groggily.

"Come on with us to the river, Jose," said Cy. "We've got to find a boat and—"

But Cy was talking to the air. Jose had shot around a corner of the shack, and was in the brush and going back toward the road to Bagdad. Lew shot

at him, but there was no chance to hit him in the thick brush.

"Another mistake!" snapped Lew. "You'll learn after a while to kill 'em while you can. He'll go straight to his gang. We've got to be gone from here when they come, and—"

"And we won't be," finished Cy, as he heard Jose screaming to someone in Spanish.

"*Aqui,* Senor! *Por aqui!* Here, sir! This way!"

'There it is!" snarled Lew. "He'll show 'em where we are, and then—"

"Into the shack!" ordered Cy. "Down on the ground, Miss Rayford, and lie still."

BARELY were they inside their flimsy fort when horsemen came tearing through the chaparral, led by Jose, on foot. He supposed the fugitives had gone on to the river and therein made a serious mistake. As he broke out of the brush a little way from the *jacal,* Old Lew got him fair through the heart. The horsemen halted in the brush, while a hoarse voice cursed them horribly. It was the voice of Jud Pelon.

Della gave a gasping cry of despair, as she heard that voice.

At that moment, Pelon was raving. He had been dragged from the burning room, by his guards. They had been able, under his direction, to break the links of his manacles, and with the bracelets still on arms and legs he had run to his own room to secure his valuables.

There he had discovered the theft of the leather bag. That bag had been constantly packed and ready for flight. He might have to disappear quickly; the bag contained Della's fortune, and much of his own.

When he saw that the bag was gone, and that Colin Hays lay dead on the floor, he went berserk with rage. Reaching the street in front of his burning house, he met the two guards returning from the first fight with the rangers. He tore one of them from his mount and vaulted to the saddle. Cursing like a maniac, he could marshal only five other mounted men. Telling the rest to arm and follow on foot, he dashed away at the head of his little squad, the jingling of his manacles mingling with his searing oaths as he rode. That bag he must regain at all costs. In it, besides the money value, were documents which, taken with other things that could be produced, would hang him—in the United States or Mexico.

Now, with five mounted cutthroats, Pelon surrounded the rangers in the flimsy little shack, while Della Rayford lay trembling with fright on the ground.

There was a lull in the uproar in the thicket, and then Pelon called: "Hey, you, in there! Throw out that bag, and we'll let you go."

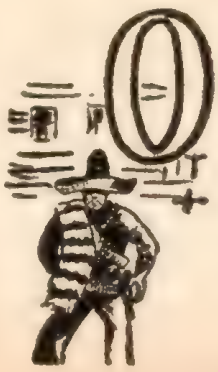
"Oh, don't trust him!" pleaded Della. "He'd lie on the gallows. He'll never let us get away."

"Don't worry," replied Cy. "He'll have to get me before he gets either you or the bag, and he hasn't got me—yet."

"How many cartridges have you got left, Cy?" asked Lew.

"Not many, but I hope they'll be enough to— Look out! Here they come!"

- 8 -



OUT OF THE brush charged Pelon, all thought of discretion thrown to the winds. His five men came with him, because he drove them. Pelon's purpose was one irresistible charge on the little *jacal.*

They charged, firing as they came on. Bullets whistled

CAR LOST ITS PEP?—BURNING OIL?

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If your car is over 3 years old or has gone over 25-30,000 miles you have probably noticed that it's not what it used to be. It probably uses too much oil, lacks power, is hard to start, is slow on the pickup, uses too much gasoline. Why? You've probably guessed that the pistons just don't fit the cylinders like they used to—that friction has worn gaps between the cylinder walls and pistons that the rings can no longer fully seal. When that happens your engine is leaking. You are losing compression and power each time a cylinder fires. Gas is leaking into the crankcase oil to undermine its lubricating powers, oil is passing up into the cylinders to be wastefully burned and formed into performance killing carbon deposits.

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A 1945 "Dodge" 6 cylinder truck had been driven over 100,000 miles without overhaul and was using over a quart of oil every 100 miles. Rated compression of engine when new was 110 lbs. After one **PEPGO RING SEAL** treatment average cylinder compression now was raised over 40% from 76 to 107 lbs. Oil consumption was greatly reduced and gasoline mileage increased.

Compression Readings—1945 Dodge Truck

	Cylinder 1	Cylinder 2	Cylinder 3	Cylinder 4	Cylinder 5	Cylinder 6
Before	87 lbs.	75 lbs.	75 lbs.	80 lbs.	75 lbs.	85 lbs.
After	100 lbs.	110 lbs.	115 lbs.	95 lbs.	105 lbs.	118 lbs.

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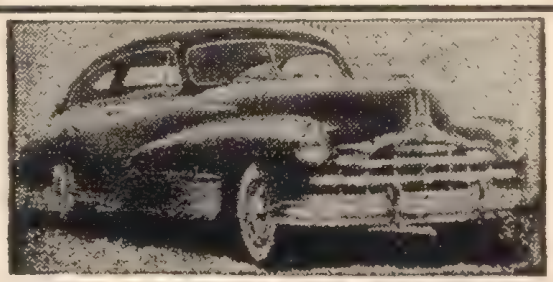

ENGINE COMPRESSION COMPLETELY RESTORED IN 1948 PONTIAC TEST NO. 2

A 1948 Pontiac "8" had been driven over 77,000 miles without an engine overhaul and was consuming a quart of oil every 200 to 300 miles. Rated compression for this engine when new was 120 lbs.

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Compression Readings—1948 Pontiac

	Cyl. 1	Cyl. 2	Cyl. 3	Cyl. 4	Cyl. 5	Cyl. 6	Cyl. 7	Cyl. 8
Before	105 lbs	95 lbs	107 lbs	120 lbs	110 lbs	115 lbs	95 lbs	125 lbs
After	125 lbs	120 lbs	120 lbs	125 lbs	122 lbs	120 lbs	115 lbs	116 lbs

This is the testimony of the experts. Now read what just a few of the many, many satisfied users have said.

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"I cannot tell you how pleased I am with the results in my 1947 Cadillac. Previous to treatment my car used one quart of oil every 250 miles. Now it uses less than a quart every thousand miles. I have also noticed a real increase in power and gas mileage. I have now driven over 3000 miles since the **Pepgo Ring Seal** application and get the same good results. I found **Pepgo Ring Seal** worth many times the price because it restored the original power of my car. "C. S. R., Chestnut Hill, Pa."

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through the flimsy walls. Splinters and debris from the storm showered the frightened girl as she lay on the ground. The rangers had punched holes in the walls, and coolly stood to the task of defense. Whose bullet it was, was never known, but in that first charge a round hole appeared squarely between Pelon's eyes. He threw up his hands and crashed from his saddle to the ground. Two more of his men went down, and the other three drew off.

"Now," said Cy, "here's where we work fast. I have an idea that we are surrounded by men on foot. The way may still be clear to the river, but this brush will be full of them in a few minutes. Our safest place is in the willows at the river bank, with the water at our backs. We've got to run for that position, and fight for it. Can you run a little way, Miss Rayford? It is only a few hundred feet to the river."

The girl nodded.

"I can do anything to get away from Jud Pelon."

"He'll never bother you again," returned Cy, in a hard, set voice, "but we have to run, just the same. Take this bag, Lew, and take Miss Rayford by the hand. When I give the word, run for the willows. All set? Go!"

Lew and the girl sprang into the thicket. The old trailer had no idea what Cy meant to do, but he had been with the young ranger in many a hot fight, and had never known him to fail when it came to the scratch. Cy ran to where Pelon had fallen, picked up the body, and ran on after his companions. He caught up with them as they reached the river bank. He placed the body down and drew a long breath.

"Good luck!" he gasped. "There is Antone's boat. . . .All we got to do—is to work our way to it—and—"

"And get shot to rags," finished Lew. He pointed to where a brown hand was reaching for the line that

[*Turn To Page* 84]

Amazing New Way TO A Slimmer Figure

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10 POUNDS IN 10 DAYS*
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Now at last science has discovered a new delightfully thrilling way to take off fat—to lose up to 25 lbs. safely! The secret is that Kelpidine Candy satisfies your craving for high calorie foods! It keeps you from overeating—the reason most doctors give for being fat! It's the best aid to will power, cuts your craving for foods!

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held the boat to a willow. Cy's gun spat; the man fell into the river.

"Lie down and stay down!" ordered Cy, as a shower of bullets swept through the branches overhead.

"Talk about being between the devil and the deep blue sea," muttered Lew. "That's plumb where we are at, now."

"I'll push 'em back while you untie the boat and drift it down here, Lew. Throw Pelon's body in the bottom of the boat, for ballast. Then you and Miss Rayford get in and hold to the willows until I come. Hang on to that bag, Miss Rayford," and Cy was gone into the thicket.

A minute later his gun was barking above the boat, while old Lew was slashing the line and drifting it to where Della waited.

"All aboard!" called Lew.

Cy gave back toward the boat, firing as he came. Bullets were whistling through the willows, but passing far above the boat and its occupants.

"The first fifty feet is the dangerous place," panted Cy. "There's a fog on the river and fifty feet away they can't see us. Head her out from the bank. Here we go!" With a mighty heave, he shoved the boat and sprang in at the same time.

Lew caught the momentum with his oars and kept it going. It fairly rained lead around the little boat. Several bullets struck it, but none below the water-line. One bullet struck the lifeless body of Pelon. Cy White, in the stern of the boat, was holding Della down with one hand, protecting her with his body, while his back was exposed to the fire from the bank. With the other hand, he steered the boat.

THEY WERE safe in the fog, within a hundred feet. That is, fairly safe from the shots that were still being fired. But the fog was thick. It was half a mile across the stream, and they

[*Turn To Page* 86]

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had no means of keeping their course.

They rowed on. The firing ceased, and a choking silence followed. At last, a high bank seemed to spring out of the fog at them. Cy didn't know whether they were on the Texas side, or had turned and gone back to Mexico. He expressed a doubt.

"It's all right," growled Old Lew. "There's a high bank on the Texas side and sandy beach and willows on the Mexican side, along here. I noticed it last night. That's good old Texas out there, thank God! I think I'll kiss the ground when I get on it again."

"That's an idea," declared Cy. "Sort of feel that way myself."

After that, silence fell over the little group in the boat. Cy exchanged places with Della. The girl had been in the bottom of the boat, almost touching the body of Jud Pelon. Up to that time, the dead, staring eyes of the master outlaw had been gazing up into the fog. Cy spread a handkerchief over the face, then took the oars to rest Lew, who had been rowing from the start.

Skirting the willows in eddy water, the boat moved slowly up the stream. Old Lew caught a limb from time to time, and with a quick pull sent the boat forward. Then he would pull a few leaves as he turned the willow loose, and drop them thoughtfully in the water. He was thinking of many things that had happened in that hectic night. Uppermost in his mind was the body of Pelon, with manacles still on the wrists and ankles, as it lay at his feet. He was wondering why Cy had brought it along, in spite of the stress they had been in at the time.

Della Rayford sat in the sternsheets, the little leather bag at her feet. She was looking intently up the river, where she could see the roofs of Fort Brown, which she had hoped

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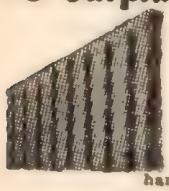

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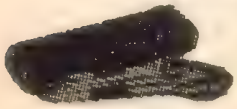

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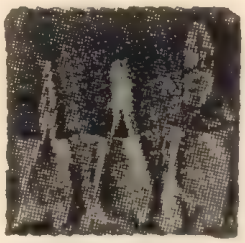

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so much to reach and which now after all her peril, seemed posssible of attainment. She was trying not to see what was in the bottom of the boat, but from time to time she glanced at the stiffening body and shuddered, not so much at death, as at the thought of what she had escaped. She started violently when the boat grounded on the bar; a moment later Cy helped her ashore, with the little bag in her hand.

They prepared some breakfast and ate it. They were liberal with the food, knowing that Jose would never need it again. After breakfast, Lew went off to find the hobbled horses. Cy and the girl sat on the two crude stools in the shack.

"Mr.—" began Della, "pardon me, but I don't know your name."

"There has been little time for formalities since we met," smiled Cy. "It is White. Cyrus White."

"Mr. White, I don't understand all that has happened to me. The hardest thing to understand is that you two men would go into such a place as Bagdad, and then through all the danger and fighting, never get excited or lose your courage."

"Some men are like that, I suppose," said Cy, "and we happen to be two of that kind."

"But why did you ever go there?"

"We followed Hays there."

"Where from?"

"There are so many things to talk about that are more entertaining, Miss—"

"Oh—I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be inquisitive. I should be satisfied and not ask questions."

"You can ask them all right," said Cy, gravely, "but just now I don't know whether I should answer them. I'm afraid you'll have to take Lew and me on faith for a while at least."

She smiled faintly at him. To Cy White, it seemed sufficient answer.

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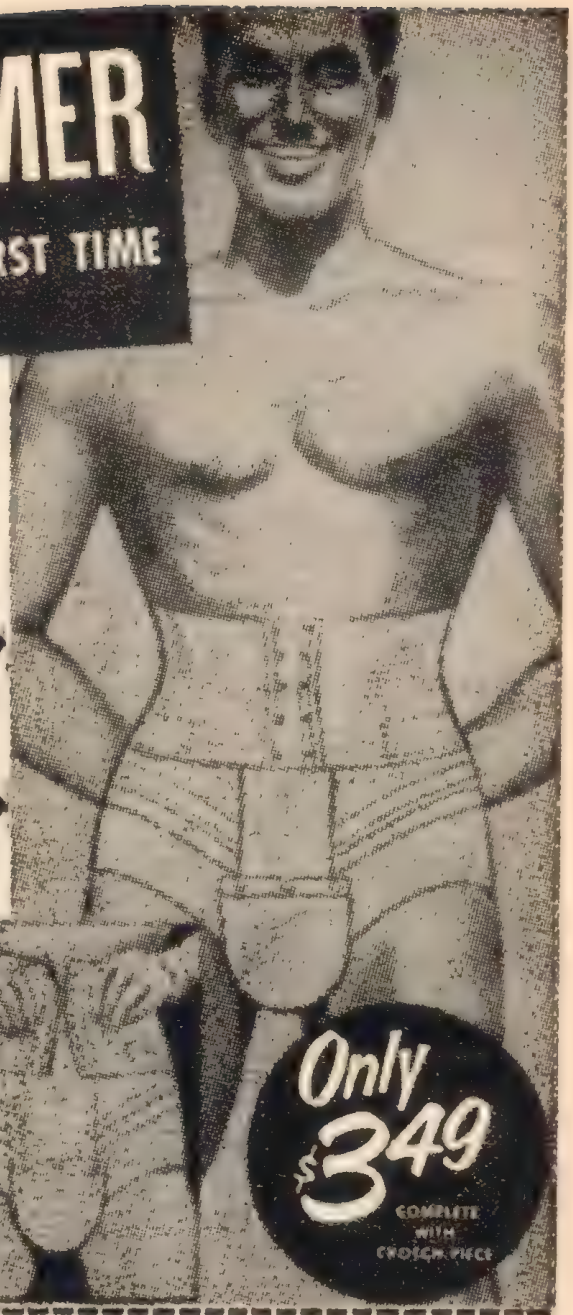

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- 9 -

CY AND THE girl had gone on talking for some time, when Old Lew came in with the three horses, all saddled and ready to ride. They were gaunt and drawn, but could make the few miles to Fort Brown.

When Pelon's body had been placed in the shack and the door closed, they mounted and took the trail up the river. Cy supposed that they would deliver the young lady at the post, then take the trail to join their command somewhere several hundred miles to the northward, but it was not to be quite so simple as that. International affairs are not handled in quite such an offhand manner.

The delay began when Cy called on the commandant at his office, and presented Miss Rayford merely as a United States citizen who had escaped from Mexico. He asked protection for her, but didn't introduce himself.

"Certainly," said the officer. "The young lady will be cared for. I'll send her to my wife at my quarters, while we discuss the matter further."

Now, the last thing Cy wanted was any further discussion of his visit to Bagdad. In the commandant's office sat a little gray man. He was a trim built fellow. His clothes were gray, his hair was gray, and his eyes were gray. He didn't speak a word until Della started out with the little leather bag in her hand, and then:

"Did you bring that bag out of Mexico with you, Miss Rayford?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Is it your own?"

"Why—why—I"

"Won't you please leave it with the commandant, for the present? I'm sure

he will be responsible for its contents." The suggestion was made in a kindly tone, but one that indicated an order rather than a request.

Della relinquished the bag to the officer; went away to the colonel's home nearby.

"Now, young man," said the little gray gentleman, "there's some explaining to be done. You have been mixed up in an international affair. The young lady may have escaped from Mexico. In fact, I am sure she did, but not alone. An explanation from you might help."

"I won't make any explanation," replied Cy, calmly looking the little man over. He wondered that a mere civilian took such an authoritative tone in the presence of the post commandant.

"You may change your mind. If you would introduce me to the young man, that might help to clear things, Colonel Bodkin."

"Mr. Gray is a trusted representative of the secret service. Mr.—"

"Cyrus White is my name."

"—Mr. White—and matters of an international nature come under his jurisdiction. It might be best to answer his questions."

"In the first place, Mr. White," said Gray, "in the absence of a customs officer, I'm going to examine the contents of this bag." Without more ado, he untied the cord and coolly spread the contents of the bag on the table before him.

There was a silence in the room, except for the rustling of the papers. At last Gray put them back in the bag, tied it up carefully.

"I suppose you know what these papers are, Mr. White?" he asked.

"I haven't examined them, but I suppose they are valuable papers, belonging to Miss Rayford. They were in her possession when you took them."

"Yes, they were," and Gray's words were slow and deliberate, "but she

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didn't take this bag from Jud Pelon." Cy started, in spite of himself. This little man knew a great deal. Then Gray shot a question in a tone that called for an answer. "Where is Pelon?"

"In a shack a few miles down the river, and on this side."

"Is there a guard with him?"

"No, sir. He can't get away. He's dead."

"Dead!" It was Gray who started this time. "Who killed him?"

"I'm not sure. He was killed in a fight, and—"

"Colonel, will you send an ambulance to that cabin, to bring the body here. These gentlemen are doubtless all right, but they'll have to be detained for the present."

A few minutes later when the ambulance rolled away, Cy and Old Lew were in the post guard room.

"Well, thank God, it's an American jail we're in," sighed Lew.

"Yes," snapped Cy. "Hell of a story if it gets out. Texas rangers in jail. They don't know we're rangers, and they never will know it from me. It would be a disgrace to the service. Old Cap Hood has told me more than once that I'd disgrace the service by some of my fool stunts, and I've done it."

"I ain't goin' to tell it," yawned Lew. "I don't like being in jail, but I'd rather be in a clean place like this, with a chance of a fair trial, than to be dragged out of a jail on the other side at sunrise and stuck up ag'in a 'dobe wall to be shot. They'd probably miss me, at that. I might be brave enough to face a firing squad, but I never could help scratching when anything was biting me." Stretching on a cot, the grim old trailer was asleep in a minute.

There was no sleep for Cy. He had got himself and Lew into this mess. The old trailer had followed willingly, and now he was just as willingly leav-

[*Turn To Page* 94]

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ing it to Cy to get him out.

While Cy sat puzzling over his situation, Mr. Gray spent an hour with Della Rayford at the Colonel's quarters. At the end of that time, he knew everything the girl knew about the mess. The trouble was, she didn't know enough. She didn't know who or what the two men in the guardhouse were. She didn't know how they came to be in Bagdad, or why. In fact, she didn't know Cy and Lew were under arrest, or she would have been more troubled than she was. It puzzled her that this little gray man seemed to know more about Pelon than she knew.

The ambulance came back, and Gray examined the body carefully, identifying it as that of Jud Pelon. There was a puzzled frown on his face as he looked at the broken manacles still on the wrists and ankles.

IT WAS LATE afternoon. Lew woke up, yelled for grub. There was a light step at the door of the guard room, and Gray entered. "You may go," he said, nodding to Lew.

"I don't go anywhere without Cy—I mean, without my partner," growled Lew truculently.

"You can wait outside."

Lew left the room, reluctantly. It was clear that he wouldn't go very far.

"Mr. White," said Gray, "the safest and best thing in this case is to be perfectly frank. Be frank with me, and I'll be frank with you. It is my duty to investigate this case, and I have an idea the investigation can begin and end right here in this room, and a lot of unpleasant details forgotten. I know already that you and your companion are not ordinary range riders, though you are clad as such. Won't you tell me, on your honor, all about this thing? I promise you, on my honor, that I will give such assistance as I can to get you and your companion out of it."

Cy looked Gray over. He knew men, and could read character. This little man was a square shooter.

"I'm Sergeant Cyrus White, Company M, Frontier Battalion, Texas Rangers," Cy began.

"I see, I see," nodded Gray. "As a ranger, you didn't have any business crossing the Rio Grande to get your man; but you did cross, and you didn't want to talk about it. I don't blame you. It is a very, very grave matter. But go ahead with the story."

Cy did go ahead, and in a few minutes Gray knew all the things that Della had been unable to tell him.

"Hmm! Grave, very grave," said Gray, shaking his head. "You not only crossed the borders of a friendly nation, but you killed several citizens of that nation before you returned." Then after a long pause, "Did you know Pelon and his ward, Miss Rayford, were at Bagdad, when you went there?"

"No! I had never heard of Bagdad until I started after Colin Hays and I never heard of Pelon and his ward until I got to Bagdad. I wish now that I had never heard of any of them."

"I don't," said Gray. "The story of Jud Pelon is a long one, and a wicked one. The most interesting point of that story now is that after amassing a considerable fortune in the heyday of Bagdad's smuggling and blockade-running days, when he was a young man, he was stranded there after the town was practically destroyed. Stranded because he couldn't come back to this country, and wasn't wanted—or rather was wanted—in other parts of Mexico. Pelon had a master mind. Piracy and smuggling were gone, so he employed his mind in another way. He became the world's most skilful counterfeiter, reproducing the coins and bills of a dozen countries. How much in spurious bills of his make have been circulated in the United States is beyond calculation.

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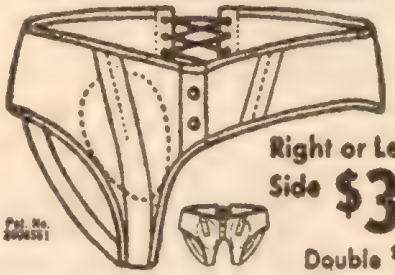

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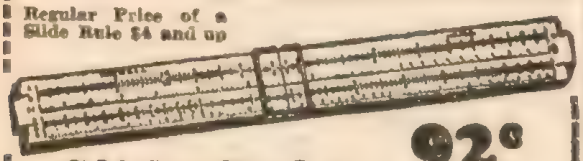

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"You mean— You mean that I won't get into trouble over this?"

"Not exactly. I don't know what may come of it. What I mean is that personally, and unofficially, I think you have done both countries a great service, and since you tell me that the House of the Caliph was destroyed by fire, I am sure that it is a permanent job. All trace of the plant and the business is wiped off the face of the earth, along with its head and master mind. Officially, I shall report that the body of Jud Pelon was found in a shack a few miles below Brownsville, on the Texas side. That it was unmistakably identified, and later buried. To you, I would say that this might have turned out in a very different manner, and for your own sake, and for the sake of the service, which might easily lose a very efficient ranger in such escapades, you should observe the lines of Texas, hereafter."

"Thank you, sir," said Cy, simply.

"There is one other thing. A handsome reward was offered for Pelon, on this side of the river, dead or alive. I think I can get it for you, without disclosing your identity."

"I don't want any reward! All I

want is to get clear of this mess, and to get a couple of good horses for myself and Private Pearson, so we can join our command."

"You are easily satisfied. I think you could get a wonderful reward for this service, if you would only press your case a little." An odd smile bent the lips of the little man. "But come on. We are to take dinner with Colonel Bodkin. Your man can eat at the mess hall, with the troopers."

IT WAS LATE that evening. Cy was standing on the gallery of the colonel's quarters, with Della Rayford.

"This will be goodbye, Miss Rayford," he said. "We will be on the trail before you wake in the morning."

"But, won't I see you again? I haven't found words yet to thank you for all you did for me. Won't—won't I ever see you again?"

"I am riding to join my command, somewhere to the north. My life is about like the sample you have seen the last twenty-four hours, so you can figure the odds against anyone seeing me again."

"You have been such a wonderful friend," she said, in a low tone. "I—I might need you again, to—to help me untangle my affairs in this country."

Cy wrote a name and a San Antonio address on a slip of paper. She looked at it by the light from a window, and a puzzled expression came to her face.

"Oh, I see! Thank you!" and she gave him her hand in farewell.

The two rangers were jogging along the old military road, far above Fort Brown, next morning, when Lew Pearson said:

"Fighting old Victorio and his gang is going to be like a Sunday School picnic, after that mess."

Riding beside him, Cy White smiled. His thoughts—whatever they were—were apparently pleasant ones.

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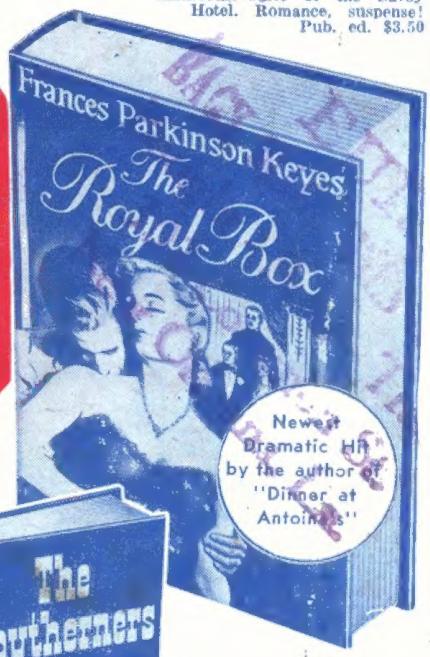

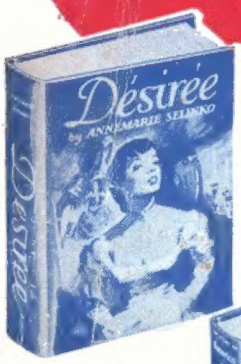

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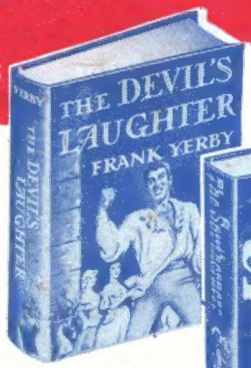

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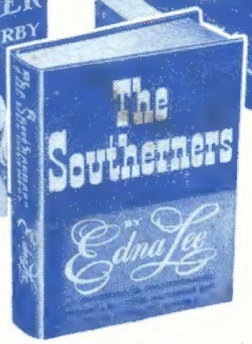

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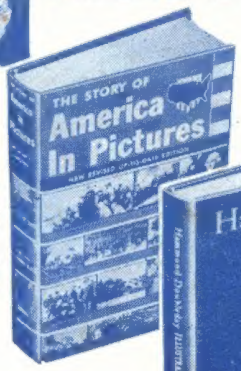

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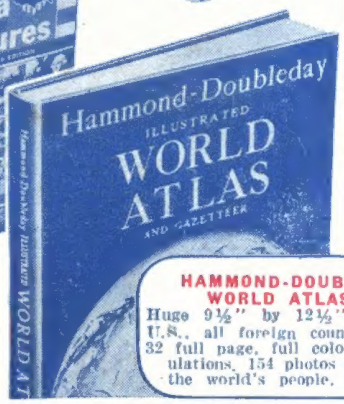

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